



Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

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*Report on the*

**Implementation of  
Initiatives to Improve  
State College  
Graduation Rates**

**April 2007**

## **Executive Summary**

This report is the first segmental report that examines performance measures and outcomes that assess progress toward achieving graduation and persistence rates at the Commonwealth's state colleges as set by the June 2005 Report of the Task Force on State College Graduation Rates. In reviewing the implementation by state colleges of the Task Force recommendations, this report compares the performance of the 1999 student cohort to the 1997 cohort. The performance measures correspond to the five-year goals for the state colleges and Board of Higher Education (BHE) that were outlined in the Report: to improve by the year 2010 students' persistence and graduation rates, reduce gaps in persistence and graduation rates related to gender, income and race, identify and secure sufficient resources to support these goals, and report progress annually to the Governor and the Legislature.

### ***Findings Highlights***

The state colleges are meeting the majority of their targets and are outperforming their national peer institutions.

- First-year retention rates are increasing and are above the national average.
- The graduation rates for all racial subgroups have increased.
- The graduation gap for Black students as compared to White students has decreased, but it has grown for Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islanders.
- Graduation rates for men have increased; women at state colleges continue to graduate at rates higher than men.
- The difference of graduation rates between women and men decreased overall but not for all racial subgroups.
- Graduation rates for Black and White men increased but decreased for Hispanics and Asian and Pacific Islander men.
- The state colleges had mixed results for performance targets aimed at transfer student graduation rates. Although the transfer student graduation rate decreased slightly, the percentage of transfer students graduating anywhere increased and those still enrolled also increased.
- All state colleges report implementing several institutional reforms and programs designed to aid the success of their students, including providing advising services, programs and other related services to support at-risk students and freshmen, and financial assistance to those students with the greatest need.
- The majority of colleges report expanding their transfer mission by either increasing the enrollment of students transferring from Massachusetts community colleges, adding articulation agreements or establishing course equivalences with community colleges.

The purpose of this report is to determine whether there has been progress on the Task Force goals, report out college initiatives and to provide an overall commentary on these items within the context of other factors. Factors preceding the Task Force's establishment are likely to have contributed to state college progress toward achieving Task Force goals earlier than the targeted date. For example, public attention on graduation rates that sparked discussion may have triggered campus initiatives intended to increase performance, and more rigorous admissions standards at the state colleges starting in 1997 may have also affected student performance.

During 2007, best practices learned will be shared at statewide and regional conferences and workshops and posted on the BHE website. The Board of Higher Education will also provide further updates to the Legislature annually until 2010.

## I. What are the goals for the state colleges and why are they important?

By 2010, the state colleges are to have achieved the following goals:

**Goal A:** Graduate over 50% of first-time, full-time students within six years and aspire to rank within the top ten states nationally, without compromising academic standards.

The bachelor's degree has become the passport to economic success. In order for Massachusetts to remain economically viable, the state must support initiatives that educate and graduate more students in the higher education sector.

**Goal B:** Improve first-year retention of first-time, full-time students by five percentage points (one point each year for five years) resulting in 80 percent of state college freshmen returning to their initial institution for their sophomore year.

Increasing first-to-second year persistence rates have been shown to be the most efficient means by which to increase graduation rates.<sup>1</sup> The major factor in increasing the percentage of first-time, full-time students who graduate in six years is increasing the number of students continuing past their freshman year.

**Goal C:** Reduce gaps in graduation rates related to gender, race, and income.

Differences in graduation rates among groups of students are unacceptable, especially at a time when the population of students that will be most in need of public higher education includes increasing numbers of students of color and students from lower-income, first-generation college, and immigrant families. These students are precisely those whose employment will fuel the Massachusetts' economy in the future.

**Goal D:** Increase degree completion rates of transfer students by 5 percentage points, resulting in 58% of transfer students graduating within four years of arrival at the institution to which they transfer.

In accordance with the methodology used to calculate graduation rates, students who transfer in or out of an institution are excluded from the six-year first-time full-time graduation rate for any one institution. Although graduation rates of first-time, full-time students are one important measure of institutional performance and student success, in order to better understand and improve the experience of all students, graduation patterns of full- and part-time students who transfer into and among the state colleges should be studied and appropriate goals set for their degree attainment.

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<sup>1</sup> Levitz, R., Noel, L., & Richter, B. (1999) Strategic Move for Retention Success. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 108, 31-49. Retrieved March 12, 2007, from Academic Search Premier Database.

## II. Methodology and Data

•The performance of the state colleges is analyzed by using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a national data base managed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education’s Higher Education Information Resource System (HEIRS). In addition to gathering and analyzing data from IPEDS and HEIRS, BHE staff created a 40-question web-based survey that was sent to the chief executive officer of each state college. The primary objective of the survey was to gather information regarding the state colleges’ implementation of strategies recommended by the Task Force and to identify best practices.

•The performance of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education is analyzed by reviewing documents and other pertinent secondary sources.

•Both a comprehensive six-year graduation rate <sup>2</sup> for all nine state colleges and a Master’s I <sup>3</sup> graduation rate will be utilized in this report. In order to make national comparisons, the Master’s I classification must be used; however, there are limitations to this measure. In the Carnegie Classification of Institutions the Master’s I graduation rate for Massachusetts excludes Massachusetts College of Art (MCA), Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) and Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) <sup>4</sup> but includes the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, which is not part of the state college system.

## III. Findings

### I: State College Progress Towards Goals

In the discussion that follows, the state colleges are assessed on their progress in meeting the goals set forth by the Task Force. Each goal is discussed separately. The indicators used to assess progress are explained and findings and data are reported accordingly.

#### Goal A: Graduate over 50% of first-time, full-time students

•Indicators: Goal A

**1. Six-year graduation rates of first-time full-time students for each state college, Massachusetts, and the United States:** Six-year graduation rates are reported in the aggregate, and they are disaggregated for racial and gender status for the 1997, 1998, and 1999 cohorts, which would have been measured in 2003, 2004, and 2005 respectively. Data for the 2000 cohort is not yet available.

**2. National Rankings of Master’s I Institutions**

<sup>2</sup> The national standards are established through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which defines the six year graduation rate as the percentage of the cohort of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking, new freshmen utilizing up to 150% of the traditional completion time to complete a degree program.

<sup>3</sup> The 2000 Carnegie Classification categorizes Master’s I institutions as those colleges and universities that offer a wide range of baccalaureate programs, are committed to graduate education through the master’s degree, and award 40 or more master’s degrees per year across three or more disciplines.

<sup>4</sup> MCLA is classified as Bac/A&S: Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences, and MMA is classified as Bac/Diverse: Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields, both of these classifications refer to institutions where baccalaureate degrees represent at least 10 percent of all undergraduate degrees and that award fewer than 50 master’s degrees or 20 doctoral degrees per year. MCA is classified as a Special Focus Institution, which is defined as an institution awarding baccalaureate or higher-level degrees where a high concentration of degrees is in a single field or set of related fields. Classifications are according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, [www.carnegiefoundation.org](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org).

**within six years and aspire to rank within the top ten states nationally, without compromising academic standards.**

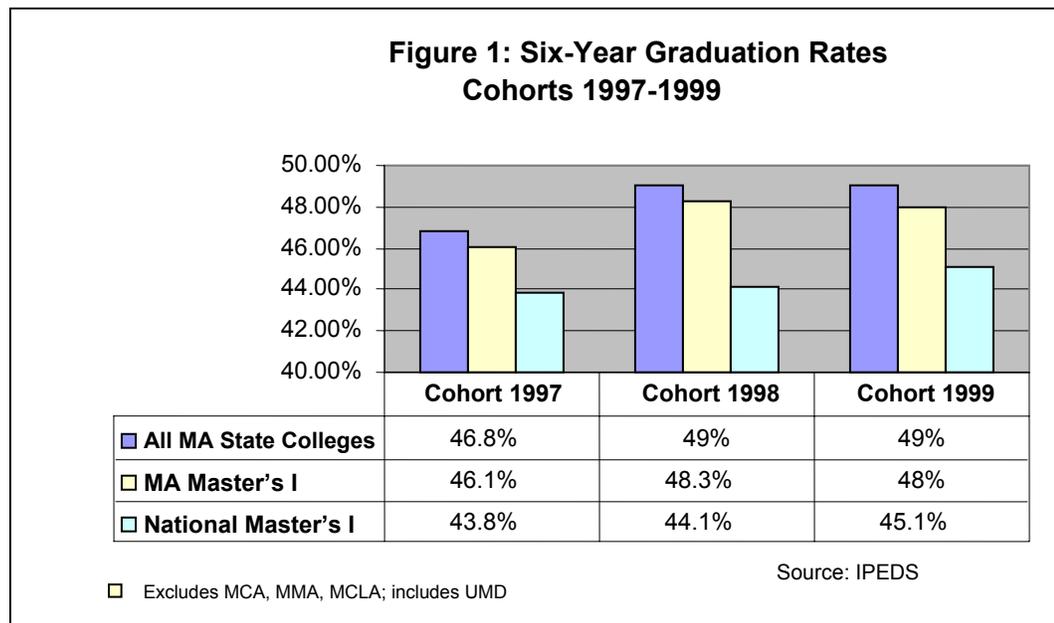
**•Findings:** Overall the state colleges are meeting their targets and are outperforming their national peer institutions. (See Figure 1.)

- The comprehensive graduation rate for all nine state colleges for the 1997 cohort was 46.8% and 49% for both the 1998 and the 1999 cohort, representing a total increase of 2.2 percentage points.

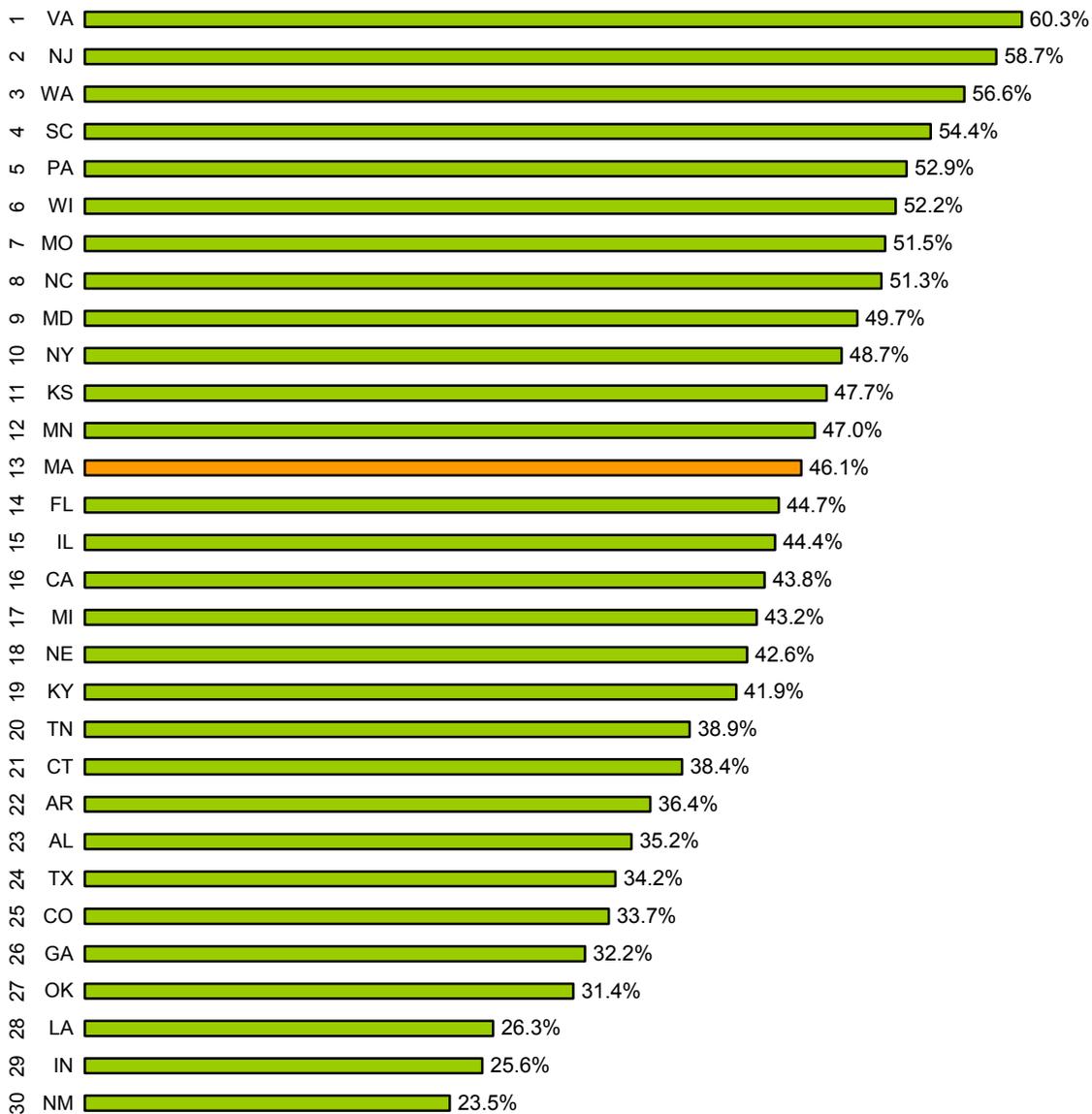
- The graduation rate for Master’s I institutions in Massachusetts increased to 48% for the 1999 cohort, a 1.9 percentage point increase in comparison to the 1997 cohort.

- Both the comprehensive and the Master’s I rate are above the national Master’s I graduation rate of 45.1% for the 1999 cohort.

- Massachusetts has improved its national rankings. In 1997 Massachusetts was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> on the Master’s I graduation rate of 46.1%. For the 1998 and 1999 cohorts, Massachusetts ranked 12<sup>th</sup> nationally with a graduation rate of 48.3% and 48% respectively. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

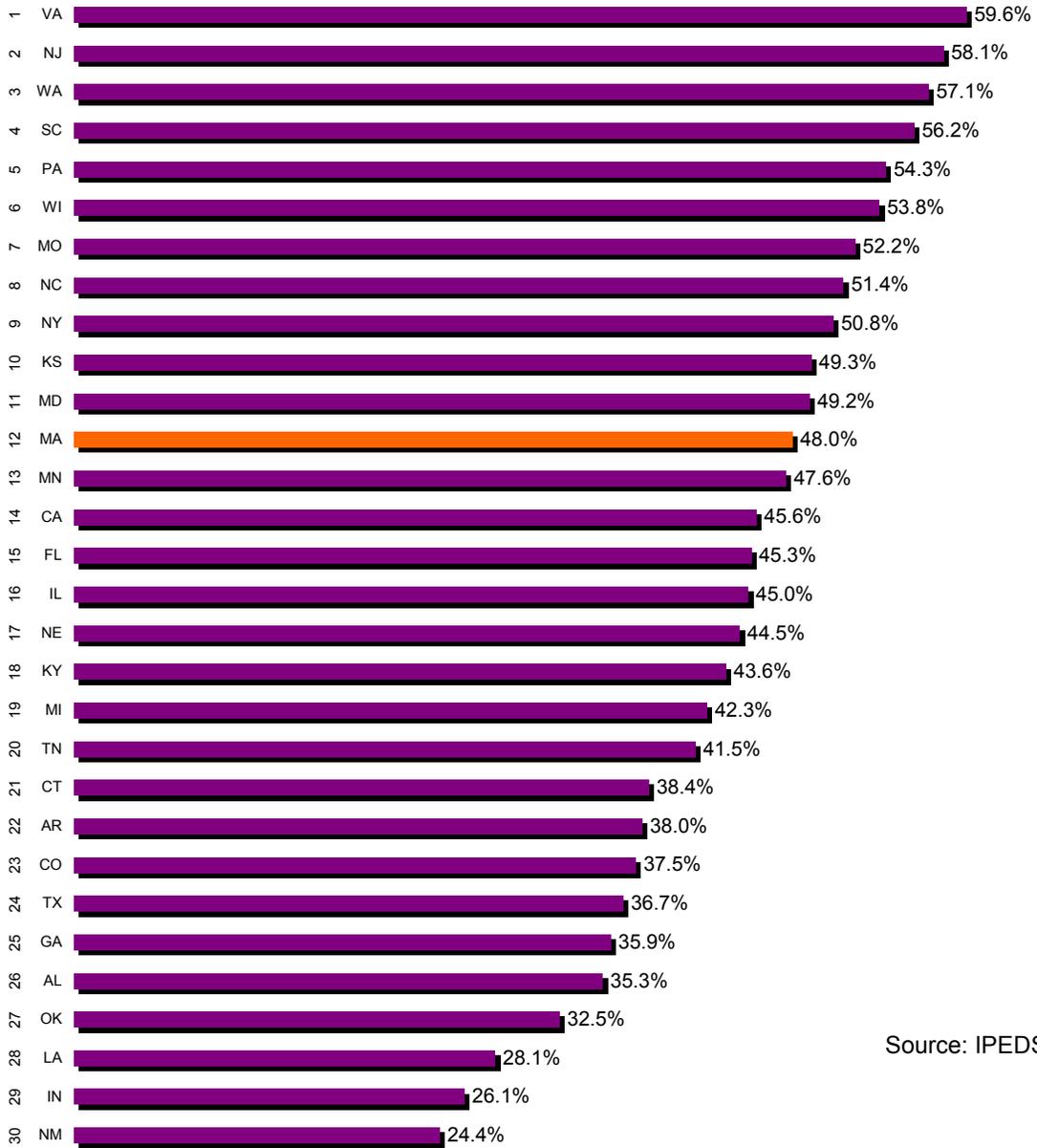


**Figure 2: 1997 Cohort  
Six-Year Public Master's I Graduation Rate  
Rankings By States with Three or More Institutions**



Source: IPEDS

**Figure 3: 1999 Cohort  
Six-Year Public Master's | Graduation Rate  
Rankings by States with Three or More Institutions**



Source: IPEDS

**Goal B: Improve first-year retention of first-time, full-time students by five percentage points (one point each year for five years) resulting in 80 percent of state college freshmen returning to their initial institution for their sophomore year.**

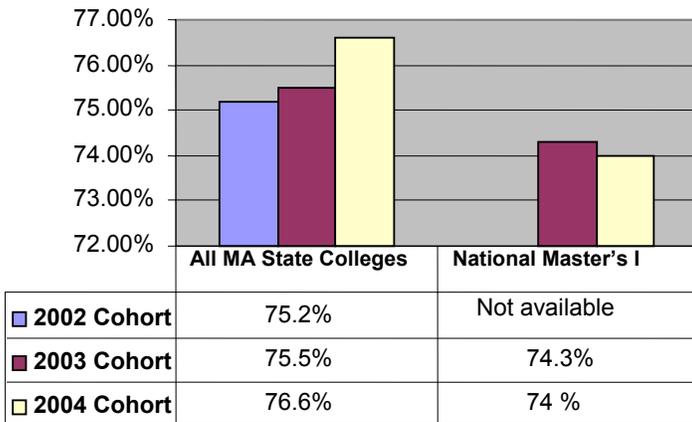
●Indicator: Goal B

▪**Fall-to-Fall first-time, full-time first-year retention rates for the state of Massachusetts** First-time students' retention rates are reported in the aggregate for the fall 2002, 2003, and 2004 cohorts, which would have been measured in 2003, 2004, and 2005, respectively. Data from fall 2005 are not yet available. For the purpose of this report, the term freshman is synonymous with first-year student.

**Findings:** First-year retention rates <sup>5</sup> are increasing and are above the national average. (See Figure 4).

- First-year retention rates have increased for every cohort since 2002. Overall the first-year retention rate increased by 1.4 percentage points for the 2004 cohort as compared to the 2002 cohort.

**Figure 4: First-year Retention Rate (Fall-to-Fall) New First-Time, Full-Time Degree Seeking Students**



Source:  
HEIRS/IPEDS

<sup>5</sup> The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) defines the first-year retention rate as the percentage of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students from the previous fall who re-enrolled by the current fall.

## Goal C: Reduce the gaps related to race, income, and gender

**Limitations of the Data:** Comparing the mean graduation rates of subgroups requires caution because of the problem of small cohort size. It is not uncommon for the cohort size of a minority group to be very small, often under 100 students, whereas the White cohort numbers in the thousands. Any numeric decrease or increase in a minority cohort represents a larger percentage loss or gain than for a majority group.

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education does not claim that the problem of small numbers is the reason for the graduation gap and recognizes that minorities are underrepresented in higher education but acknowledges that making comparisons based upon differences in means presents problems when cohort groups are not of similar size.

### Indicators: Goal C

- (1) Minority six-year graduation rates
- (2) Graduation gap between minority and White students
- (3) Six-year graduation rates of men and women
- (4) Six-year graduation rates of men by race.

•Although the Task Force goals included a recommendation to improve graduation rates of students identified as low-income, there is no income proxy collected by HEIRS or IPEDS that will capture this information. Information concerning low-income students is collected through the survey data.

•The graduation rate of American Indian and Alaska Native students will not be reported due to small cohort size.

### 1: Minority Six-Year Graduation Rates <sup>6</sup>

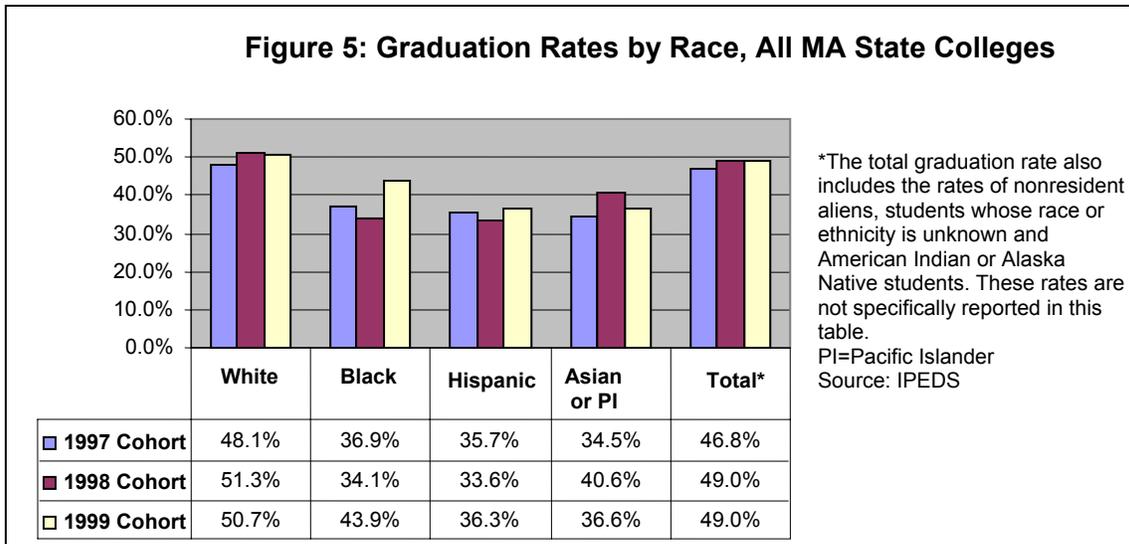
•**Findings:** The graduation rates of Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, White and Hispanic students have all increased since the 1997 cohort. (See Figure 5.)

Comparing the 1999 cohort to the 1997 cohort:

- The graduation rate for Black students increased by 7 percentage points.
- The graduation rate for Asians and Pacific Islanders increased by 2.1 percentage points.
- The graduation rate for White students increased by 2.6 percentage points.
- The graduation rate for Hispanics increased by .6 percentage points.

<sup>6</sup> The terms White rather than White, non-Hispanic, and Black, rather than Black, non-Hispanic, are used due to space constraints in the tables. PI refers to Pacific Islander.

**Figure 5: Graduation Rates by Race, All MA State Colleges**



## 2: Graduation gap between the six-year graduation rates of minority and White students<sup>7</sup>

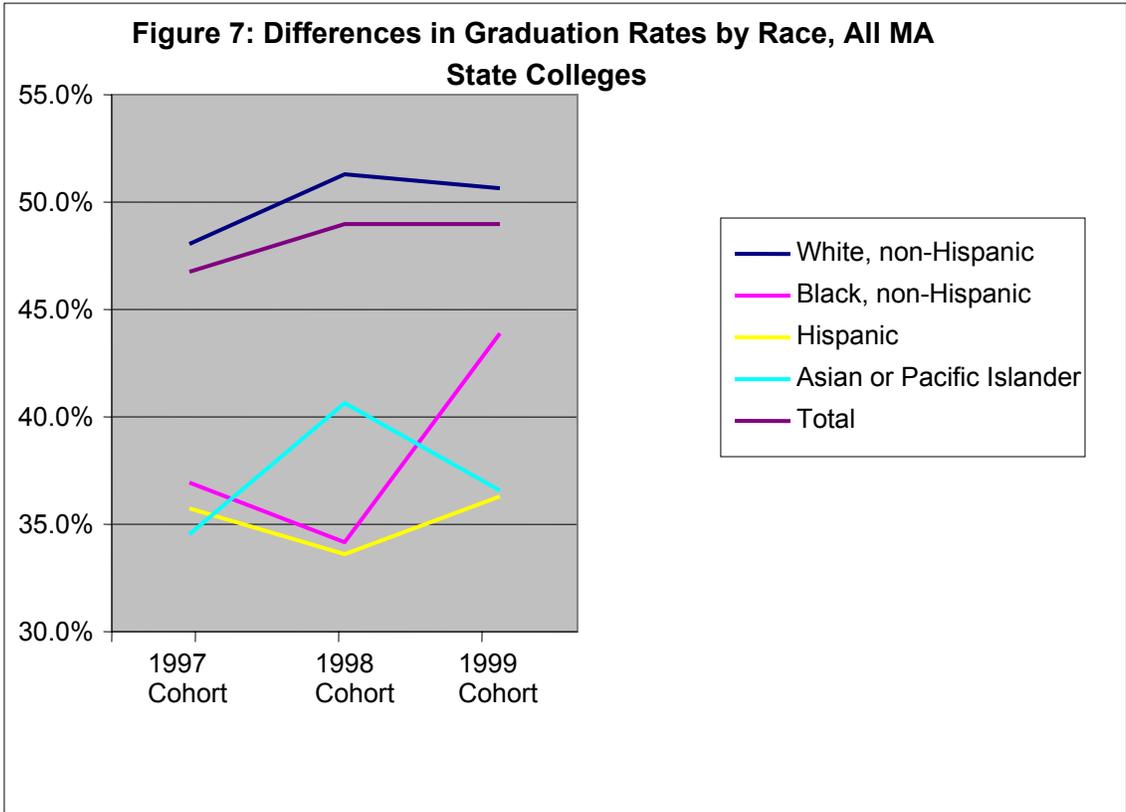
**Findings:** In comparison to the 1997 cohort, the graduation gap for Black students has decreased, but it has grown for Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islanders. (See Figure 5 for graduation rates for different subgroups, Figure 6 for an illustration of how the graduation gap was calculated and Figure 7 for a graphic illustration of the difference in graduation rates among racial subgroups over time.)

Comparing the 1999 cohort to the 1997 cohort:

- The graduation gap between White students and Black students decreased 4.4 percentage points,
- The graduation gap between White students and Hispanic students increased 2 percentage points.
- The graduation gap between White students and Asian and Pacific Islanders increased by .5 percentage points.

<sup>7</sup> The graduation gap is defined as the difference between the graduation rate of a particular racial subgroup and the graduation rate of White students. For example, in 1997 the graduation rate for White students was 48.1% and Black students 36.9%, representing a gap of -11.2 percentage points. In 1999 the graduation rate for White students was 50.7% and for Black students it was 43.9%, representing a gap of -6.8 points; thus, subtracting -11.2-(-6.8), the gap decreased by 4.4 points for the 1999 cohort as compared to the 1997 cohort. See Figure 6.

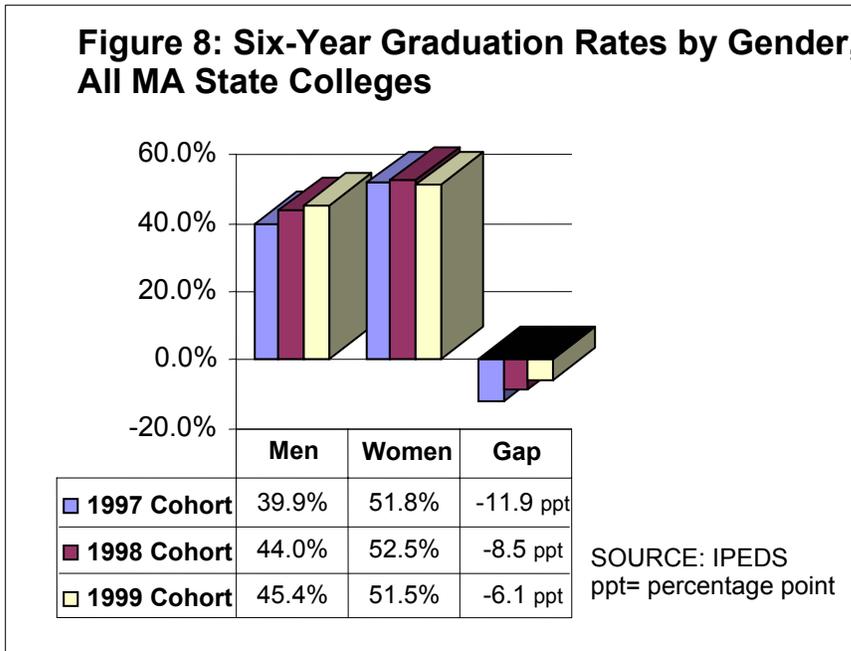
| <b>Figure 6: Graduation Gap Between White Students and racial subgroups, All MA state colleges</b> |  |       |           |   |           |  |           |
|--|--|-------|-----------|---|-----------|--|-----------|
| Cohort   | White  | Black | (Gap)     | Hispanic  | (Gap)     | Asian/PI   | (Gap)     |
| <b>1997 Cohort</b>   | 48.1%  | 36.9% | -11.2 ppt | 35.7%   | -12.4 ppt | 34.5%  | -13.6 ppt |
| <b>1999 Cohort</b>   | 50.7%  | 43.9% | -6.8 ppt  | 36.3%   | -14.4 ppt | 36.6%  | -14.1 ppt |
| <b>Change</b>  | <b>4.4 ppt decrease between White and Black students</b> |       |           | <b>2.0 ppt increase between White and Hispanic students</b> |           | <b>.5 ppt increase between White and Asian and Pacific Islander Students</b> |           |
|  | <b>PI=Pacific Islander<br/>ppt=Percentage Point</b>      |       |           |   |           |  |           |



### 3: Graduation Rates of Men and Women

**Findings:** Graduation rates for men have increased since the 1997 cohort. Overall the gender gap<sup>8</sup> is decreasing. Women at state colleges, however, continue to outperform men. (See Figure 8 for the graduation rates for men and women and an illustration of the gap between them.)

- The graduation rate for men in the 1997 cohort was 39.9% and for the 1999 cohort, 45.4%, representing a total growth of 5.5 percentage points.
- The graduation gap between men and women was 11.9 percentage points for the 1997 cohort and 6.1 percentage points for the 1999 cohort, representing a total decrease of 5.8 percentage points.



### 4: Graduation Rates of Men by Race

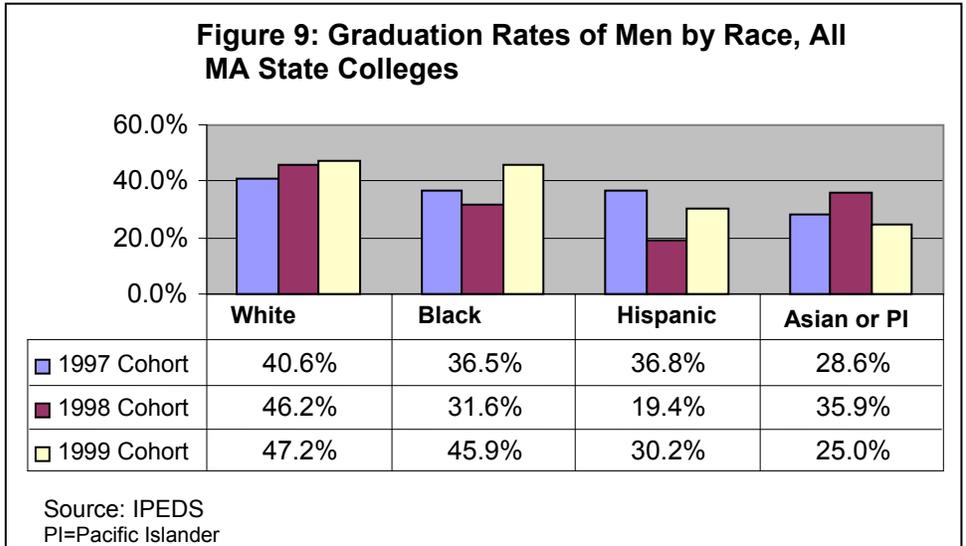
**Findings:** The graduation rates for Black and White men increased from the 1997 cohort to the 1999 cohort but decreased for Hispanics and Asian and Pacific Islanders. (See Figure 9.)

Comparing the 1999 cohort to the 1997 cohort:

- Graduation rates for Black men increased by 9.4 percentage points.

<sup>8</sup> The gender gap is defined as the difference in the graduation rate between women and men. For the 1997 cohort the graduation rate of men was 39.9% and women 51.8%, representing a gap of -11.9.

- Graduation rates for White men increased by 6.6 percentage points.
- Graduation rates for Asian and Pacific Islander men decreased by 3.6 percentage points.
- Graduation rates for Hispanic men decreased by 6.6 percentage points.



**Goal D: Increase degree completion rates of transfer students by 5 percentage points, resulting in 58% of transfer students graduating within four years of arrival at the institution to which they transfer.**

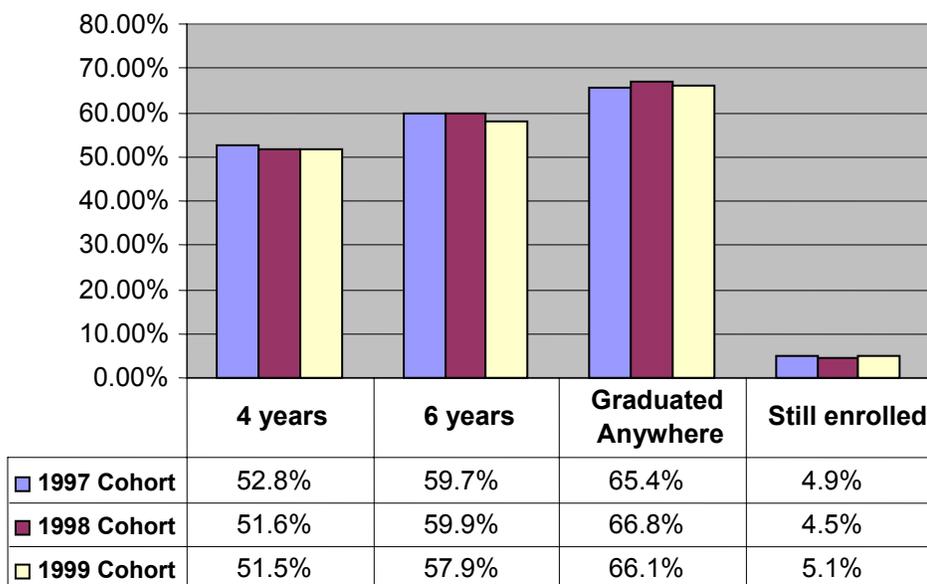
**Findings:** The state colleges had mixed results for performance targets aimed at transfer student graduation rates. (See Figure 10.)

- The four-year transfer graduation rate decreased by 1.3 percentage points for the 1999 cohort as compared to the 1997 cohort.
- The percentage of transfer students graduating anywhere increased, and those still enrolled increased for the 1999 cohort as compared to the 1997 cohort.

**Indicator: Goal D**

▫ **Graduation rates of transfer students for the state of Massachusetts.** The graduation rates of transfer students are reported in the aggregate for the 1997, 1998 and 1999 cohorts.

**Figure 10: Transfer Student Graduation Rates, All MA State Colleges**



Source: HEIRS and National Student Clearing house

**Key:**

6 years = Percentage of students who graduated at the institution to which they transferred within six years  
 4 years = Percentage of students who graduated at the institution to which they transferred within four years  
 Graduated anywhere: Percentage of those students who graduated either at the initial institution to which they transferred, or at another MA public, out-of-state or private institution within six years.  
 Still enrolled: Percentage of those students who are still enrolled either at the initial institution to which they transferred, or at another MA public, out-of-state or private institution within six years.

**Part B: Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Progress Towards Goals**

The Task Force on State College Graduation Rates called upon the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education to make retention among its highest priorities, providing statewide leadership and advocating for funding for state colleges to implement retention strategies, as well as for increased financial aid allocation for low-income students.

The Task Force established three goals for the Board to achieve by 2010. Each goal along with findings follows accordingly:

**Goal A:** Provide leadership through coordination of system-wide degree attainment activities, services, and resources as well as initiatives that strengthen college readiness.

**Findings:** The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education is providing leadership, services and resources to the state colleges that will enhance college readiness, persistence, and retention rates.

### **School-to-College (P-16) Database**

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and the Department of Education collaborated to build a database that will allow the Commonwealth to track the performance of public school students from kindergarten through college. The Commonwealth will be able to use never-before-linked data to target under-served populations that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education, measure policies, and provide high schools with updates on the progress of their students in college. Currently, the database contains information on high school completers from 2003, 2004, and 2005 who have enrolled in any Massachusetts public higher education institution.

### **School-to-College Report**

This report will be drawn from the School-to-College (P-16) database in order to help ensure college access and success, and is scheduled to be completed by the upcoming academic year. All Massachusetts school districts will be included in the report. In addition, 12 to 15 high schools will be selected for a pilot program focused on higher education planning. Within these high schools, focus groups comprising students, parents, teachers, and administrators will be conducted. The research questions will emphasize understanding and analyzing methods to improve high school preparation for college, college enrollment, retention, program choice, and completion. The School-to-College Report will serve as a catalyst for discussion among various stakeholders about the academic performance of Massachusetts high school graduates and will benefit a variety of stakeholders who can use the report's data to better prepare students for higher education.

### **Higher Education Planning Module**

Based upon findings from the School-to-College Report, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education will develop workshops for high school students, parents, teachers and school administrators. The goal of the Higher Education Planning Module is to educate students and their parents about the benefits of higher education and to equip them with the knowledge and understanding needed to successfully negotiate the process of preparing for, enrolling in and completing college.

### **“Think Again” Campaign**

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and the Department of Education launched the “Think Again” multi-media outreach campaign in January 2007, urging teens, specifically those who are underrepresented in higher education, to think again about their futures, finish high school and go to college. Ads featuring Boston Arts Academy students’ are featured in a variety of media outlets, including radio, cable, and cinema. Print ads have been placed on public transportation, and posters will be sent to all Massachusetts high schools. The aim of the ads is to direct viewers to [www.readyssetgotocollege.com](http://www.readyssetgotocollege.com), a new website designed to provide simple specific steps to help students understand what they need to graduate high school and go to college.

### **The Community College Task Force Report**

The Task Force on Retention and Completion Rates at the Community Colleges was established by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education in December 2005 to better understand community college graduation rates and the limitations of existing performance measures in order to ultimately increase the success and educational goal attainment for all community college students. The Final Report from the Task Force on

Retention and Completion Rates at the Community Colleges was published in February 2007.

### **Student Persistence and Graduation Conference**

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education will host the first statewide persistence and graduation conference during 2007. The objective of this conference is to share the results of this report with the state colleges, provide discussion of lessons learned and best practices, and provide support to the state colleges in improving student persistence and graduation rates.

### **Web-Page on the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Website Devoted to Best Practices**

Institutional best practices concerning efforts to improve student persistence and graduation rates will be posted on the BHE website. The purpose of this website posting is to provide campuses with up-to-date initiatives related to improving college graduation rates.

### **Alignment Initiative.**

Through this two-phase National Governors Association- (NGA) funded initiative, the Board of Higher Education, including the University of Massachusetts and the Department of Education 1) brought together faculty to assess the alignment of high school standards and college expectations in English and mathematics and 2) assembled a statewide advisory group from K-12, higher education, and business that helped define a rigorous curriculum to better prepare students for college and careers. Legislation has been filed to require this curriculum for students enrolled in Massachusetts public high schools.

**Goal B:** Advocate on behalf of state colleges for funding to design and implement retention strategies that effectively improve and sustain four-year degree completion rates and reduce completion gaps related to race, gender and income.

**Findings:** The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education has requested funding for each state college for support services and has been awarded several grants to fund projects with the stated goal of improving persistence and graduation rates, especially of those students who are underrepresented in higher education. The state college campuses also requested significant funding for new and enhanced initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates. Under the current state budget environment however, such funding was not feasible.

- Although there is no discrete funding for campus retention activities, colleges do receive discretionary support service funding as determined by the BHE funding formula, which encompasses many of these activities. The BHE requests funding for each college in a manner consistent with its national peers.

- The Board of Higher Education has been awarded grants from the Nellie Mae Foundation, the Information Technology Division of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the National Governors Association, which are being used to implement the School-to-College Report, the Higher Education Planning Model, the School-to-College Database, and the “Think Again” Campaign.

**Goal C: Advocate for increasing financial aid allocations at least to their level in FY2001, focusing on students with greatest financial need**

**Findings:** The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education has advocated in the interest of all Massachusetts residents, focusing on those with the greatest financial need, in order to increase access to higher education.

- The Final Report from the Task Force on Student Financial Aid was released in October 2006. The Task Force was created because of concern about the erosion of resources of student financial aid since 2001 and its negative impact on students' ability to attend college. The final report represents two years of discussion and analysis and evaluates the effectiveness of current Massachusetts state financial aid programs, identifies areas and financial aid programs that should be modified, and recommends changes in policy that if implemented would promote access to higher education for needy students. The report can be accessed through the following link:

[http://www.mass.edu/p\\_p/includes/meetings/2007/BHE.10.19/Financial%20Aid%20Task%20Force%20Report%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.mass.edu/p_p/includes/meetings/2007/BHE.10.19/Financial%20Aid%20Task%20Force%20Report%20FINAL.pdf)

- Informed by the Final Report from the Task Force on Student Financial Aid, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education requested an increase of \$79 million for fiscal year 2008 to restore MASS Grant to students with an expected family contribution equal to or less than \$3,850. This amount would impact approximately 68,000 students. In addition, the BHE has requested an additional \$75 million for FY 2008 to expand eligibility to an additional 30,000 middle income students whose EFC is between \$3,851 and \$10,000.

## VI: Findings from the Survey

The staff at the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education created a 40-question web based survey with the primary objective of assessing the state college 's implementation of strategies recommended by the Task Force and identifying best practices in the following areas of assessment: institutional initiatives, advising services, at-risk students, freshmen, transfer students, and financial aid and related services. The findings pertaining to each area are discussed below.

### I: Institutional Initiatives

**Findings:** All nine state colleges report implementing institutional reforms and programs designed to aid the success of their students.

- Eight colleges report communicating to students and parents that graduation in four years is possible via a variety of formats, including lectures, presentations, and orientation meetings.
- Seven colleges report delivering courses in order to maximize course offerings when students are most available.
- Six colleges report establishing campus-wide retention committees, and one college reports that it is in the process of doing so.
- Five colleges report offering on-line courses.
- Three colleges report establishing policies to reduce the number of required courses in majors where feasible.
- Three colleges report conducting a critical path analysis or similar analysis of institutional obstacles that hinder students from graduating in four years.
  - Salem State College reports recently completing an intensive six-month study of the various pathways to success for their students and an examination of obstacles. The College reports the following recommendations to improve outcomes: “Redesign of student services to enable students, faculty, and staff easier access to the services available, increased number of courses offered on-line, continuing integration of the various College databases, roll out of proven successful small programs to larger numbers of students, increased state/private support of Salem State College capital operating budget...”
- None of the colleges report using graduation contracts, nor have they adopted unique incentives to encourage timely graduation, such as reduced tuition.

### II. Advising Services

**Findings:** All colleges report offering students a variety of advising services designed to aid student academic success.

- Eight colleges report having established peer advising programs.
- Seven colleges report initiating advising training programs; however, it should be noted that training is often not required, but rather encouraged. For example, six of the colleges report that advisors are required to participate in training upon hiring; whereas, two colleges report requiring full-time faculty to attend annual advising training sessions.
- Six colleges report training their advisors to recognize behaviors that are associated with attrition, such as not attending classes or falling behind in credits.
- Six colleges report having an alert system to warn advisors of a particular student who may be at-risk of dropping out.
  - Framingham State College reports, “We have an Early Warning Program where faculty communicates to the Center for Academic Support and Advising (CASA) the names of any student who shows behaviors that could lead to attrition. Staff of CASA call, email, and follow up with those students.”
- Five colleges report offering specific advising for undeclared students.
- Five colleges report identifying best practices in advising. These best practices are typically disseminated during formal training sessions and through informal means, such as email, newsletters and handbooks.
- Three colleges report having on-line advising programs.

### III: At-Risk Students

**Findings:** All state colleges report offering numerous services to support at-risk students.

- All nine colleges report developing a cohort model to help at-risk students persist.
- All nine colleges report utilizing intrusive advising techniques.
- Eight colleges report providing a home base, where students can receive both personal and academic services.
- Eight colleges report identifying the subgroups on campus with the lowest persistence and graduation rates.
- Eight colleges report actively engaging initiatives to improve the persistence and graduation rates of racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation college students, and seven report doing so for low-income students
- Six colleges report that special academic and personal mentors regularly check in with at-risk students.

- Four colleges report not exploring the reasons for graduation and persistence gaps among subgroups. Two colleges report that research activities have been undertaken but findings are not yet available or that findings at this point in time are inconclusive.
- Three colleges report exploring the reasons for graduation gaps. These colleges report financial issues, number of hours worked, the need for remedial courses, motivation, academic commitment and preparation, and/or engagement as possible variables affecting the graduation gap.
- Four state colleges report conducting assessments of advising and support services for at-risk students, and five report being in the process of doing so.
  - Worcester State College reports, “We are doing a good job of retaining these students from the first to second year. We need to develop strategies to work with them during that second year to improve sophomore to junior retention.”
- Three colleges report targeting financial aid counseling specifically to the needs of at-risk students.
- Three colleges report actively engaging students transitioning out of foster care.
- Two colleges report setting measurable objectives to reduce the graduation gap related to gender, income and ethnicity.
- Two colleges report actively engaging male students, and three report targeting minority males.

#### IV. Freshmen

**Findings:** Eight state colleges report identifying courses in which freshmen struggle, and all of the state colleges report offering numerous programs and services to help freshmen persist.

- All colleges report establishing connections with freshmen and their families through family weekends, parent newsletters, parent nights at social events, such as ball games, informational seminars, email and other informal means.
- All colleges report requiring freshmen to meet with advisers before they are allowed to register for classes.
- Eight colleges report identifying courses that have the highest first-year drop, withdrawal and/or failure rates. The majority of the courses cited were math-related courses.
- Seven colleges report offering formal tutoring, peer tutoring, small class size, study groups and remedial instruction to those students taking these courses.

- Seven state colleges report conducting assessments of their advising and support services for freshmen, and two report being in the progress of doing so.
  - Bridgewater State College reports, “First-year students are asked to provide feedback about the usefulness of advising sessions at the conclusion of New Student Orientation, after mandatory group advising sessions during the first college semester, and via an electronic survey made available after pre-registration near the end of each semester. Feedback indicates that first-year students’ needs for information about college policy and processes are being adequately met through the five required advising contacts. Because the advising curriculum repeatedly presents the many support services available to students, and because many students are placed in first-semester courses with attached learning assistance, campus support services are well utilized.”
- Six colleges report utilizing either freshman seminars, freshman living/learning halls in residences, freshman curriculum clusters, and/or freshman learning communities. Three colleges report implementing freshman interest groups.
  - Massachusetts Maritime Academy reports, “The Regiment of Cadets is a significant factor in fostering camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Additionally, all freshmen share a common first-semester academic experience, and nearly all participate in the freshman Sea Term cruise. These experiences promote persistence and graduation by giving our students more of a "family" feel than they would experience at other colleges.”
- Five colleges report an increase in the number of freshman courses taught by full-time faculty.
- Two colleges report offering instructional support to instructors who teach courses that have been identified to have high first-year drop, withdrawal and/or failure rates.
- Two colleges report administrating early Accuplacer, a college placement test, to high school juniors or seniors.

## V. Transfer Students

**Findings: Seven state colleges report either increasing their enrollment of students transferring from Massachusetts community colleges, adding articulation agreements and/or establishing course equivalences with community colleges.**

- Seven colleges report adding 33 articulation agreements and establishing course equivalencies with community colleges.
- Five colleges report that their enrollment of students transferring from Massachusetts community colleges has increased since 2004.

- Four colleges report that since 2004 they have increased their enrollment of students who participate in the Joint Admissions program.
- Four colleges report conducting interviews, three reporting conducting surveys, and one college reports conducting focus groups in order to investigate the needs of transfer students. Below are some findings of the colleges:
  - Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts reports, “A survey is administered to all students who withdraw from the College. Data analysis is ongoing. The main reason for leaving MCLA is finances rather than academic or student life-oriented reasons.”
  - Westfield State College reports, “We have created a new Transfer Orientation. Evaluations of transfer orientation show that while transfer students have said that while they appreciate our efforts and attempts, they just want to make sure they get the necessary classes. They do not wish to participate in more traditional orientation programs, even if they are going away from home for the first time.”
  - Fitchburg State College reports, “There is a need to work directly with transfer advisors at community colleges to coordinate transition. Formal structures (e.g., Central Links) are useful to establish/renew articulation agreements. Transfer students are often commuters who may not access available services as readily as resident students.”

## VI. Financial Aid and Related Services

**Findings: All colleges report ongoing institutional initiatives to ensure that those students with the greatest need are being offered the most financial assistance and providing students with numerous services aimed at helping them to afford college.**

- All colleges report offering workshops or classes on budgeting, credit card awareness, financial literacy, life balance counseling, and/or debt management for after graduation.
- Eight colleges report that they offer career planning.
- Eight colleges report allotting a larger percentage of their institutional aid based upon need rather than merit. The state colleges report a range of 50% to 90% as the percentage of institutional aid that is need-based and a range of 10% to 50% as merit-based. Seventy percent is the mode reported for the percentage of institutional need-based aid and 30% as the mode for merit-based.
  - Massachusetts College of Art reports that all Massachusetts students with an expected family contribution (EFC) of less than or equal to \$8,000 are offered grant aid.

- Seven colleges report notifying returning students of their financial aid package in the spring prior to the beginning of the fall semester
- Five colleges report that students can access financial aid information on-line.
- Three colleges report that essential student services are located within a one-stop center. Two other colleges report that they are in the process of doing so.
- Two colleges report providing affordable housing placement services.

## **V. Conclusion**

Overall, the state colleges and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education are making progress towards the goals outlined by the Task Force on Graduation Rates. Graduation and first-year retention rates have improved and are above the national average. The Commonwealth's state colleges are offering students numerous services to aid in their success, and the Board is supporting the state colleges' efforts to do so.

During 2007, best practices learned will be shared at statewide and regional conferences and workshops and posted on the BHE website. The Board of Higher Education will also provide further updates to the Legislature annually until 2010.