



## Multiple-Year Retention in the University System of Georgia Student Persistence and Success

### Introduction

In the University System of Georgia and in higher education generally, student retention is most commonly measured for the first year, i.e., from the matriculating fall term to the next fall term. The target cohort usually consists of first-time, full-time students seeking a degree or certificate, because students beginning college with those characteristics are considered to be the most similar in their academic and social characteristics.

*Multiple-year retention is a basic measure of overall institutional effectiveness, with degree attainment the ultimate goal for undergraduate students.*

Student persistence through degree completion is the primary goal of baccalaureate level colleges and universities, so multiple-year student retention, or the continued enrollment of students in academic course work from fall to fall, is a basic measure of overall institutional effectiveness, with degree attainment the ultimate goal for undergraduate students. Many of the

same variables affect both first-year and multiple-year retention, e.g., the academic and social characteristics of students, institutional mission, student engagement, institutional programs to improve student retention, and such factors as student choice of a major, student commitment to long-term goals, and various institutional characteristics.

This paper examines *multiple-year* student retention in the University System of Georgia, following the Fall 1996 student cohort from the first fall term of enrollment through six succeeding fall terms (see Appendix A). As with first-year retention, the multiple-year cohort consists of first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students, and multiple-year retention rates are calculated as the percentages of the original cohort that are either re-enrolled or have received a certificate or degree from one fall term to the next.<sup>1</sup>

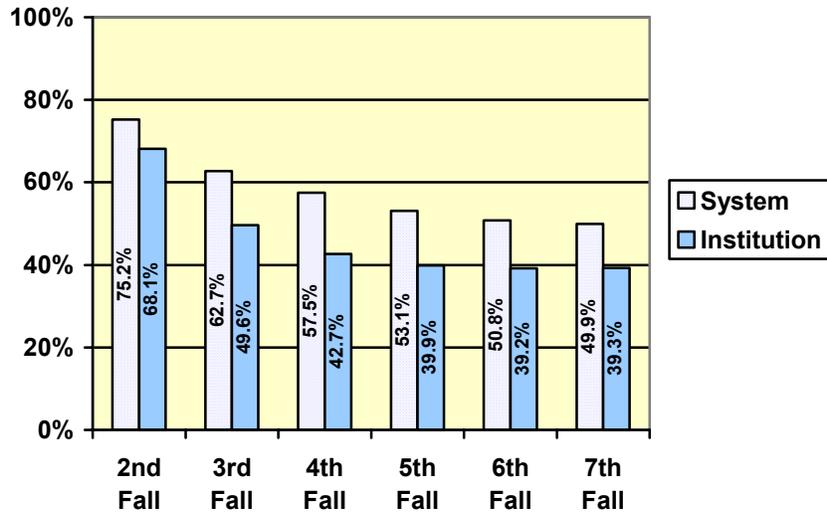
### Multiple-Year Retention Rates for the Fall 1996 Cohort

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the Fall 1996 freshman cohort that is retained at the matriculating or any other USG institution in the subsequent fall terms shown.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that for retention rate calculations, students pursuing *any* degree or certificate are included in the base cohort. Thus, the base cohorts are not directly comparable to those for graduation rate reports, which include only students seeking that specific degree.

**Figure 1**  
**USG Multiple-Year Retention Rates**  
**Percentage of First-Time, Full-Time Degree-Seeking Students Retained**  
**Fall 1996 Through Fall 2002**



The percentage retention rates in Figure 1 include students in the Fall 1996 cohort who either re-enrolled in each succeeding term or graduated between their first fall term and each succeeding fall. The chart shows that the largest percentage drop in the institution-specific retention of Fall 1996 cohort students, 31.8 percentage points, comes between the first and second fall terms. That is more than half of the total six-year drop in the cohort retention rate. The next year, an additional 18.6 percent of the beginning cohort failed to re-enroll or graduate from their original institutions, then another 6.9 percent the next year, and an additional 2.8 percent by the fifth fall term. The remaining decrease in the retention rate is less than one percentage point through the seventh fall term.

Conversely, after seven fall terms 39.3 percent of the beginning cohort are either still enrolled at their original institution (5.6 percent) or have obtained a certificate or degree from that institution (33.7 percent). If the six-year retention rate is calculated for re-enrollment or graduation System-wide, i.e., at the same or any other USG institution, the percentage of students enrolled or graduated is about 10 points higher, or 49.9 percent of the original cohort (10.7 percent still enrolled; 39.2 percent graduated). While both re-enrollment and graduation components are built into retention rate calculations, the graduation sub-percentage cannot be compared to separately calculated graduation rates for one primary reason: *graduation rate* calculations are based on a more selective student cohort, i.e., students pursuing just the specific degree for which the graduation rate is calculated.

***Differences by Sector***

While the pattern of multiple-year retention is similar within institutional sectors of the University System, the percentages and the rates of change differ by sector according to

admissions requirements and other factors. Figure 2 shows the System-wide retention rates calculated separately by sector.

**Figure 2**  
**System-Wide Multiple-Year Retention Rates By Sector**  
**Fall 1996 Through Fall 2002**

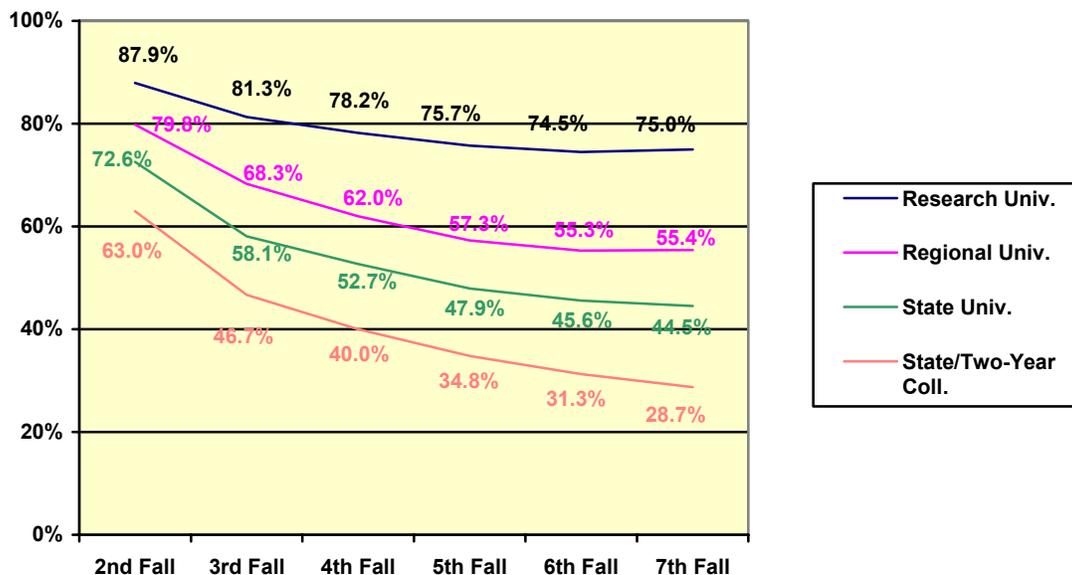


Figure 2 shows that almost 88 percent of first-time, full-time certificate- or degree-seeking freshmen entering the USG at a research university re-enroll at a System institution in the following fall term. Over the six years following the first term, 3 of every 4 students matriculating at a research university have either graduated or are still enrolled at a USG institution (2 of those 3 have graduated). In terms of retention by the original institution, 61 percent of the research university sub-cohort has graduated, and 6 percent is re-enrolled at the matriculating university for a six-year institution-specific persistence rate of 67 percent.

By comparison, just 63.0 percent of the freshmen enrolling for the first time at a USG two-year college (which in Fall 1996 included the two current state colleges) return to a System institution in the second fall term, and through six years, only about 29 percent are still enrolled at or have graduated from a System institution.

*Three out of four Fall 1996 first-time, full-time freshmen at USG research universities either graduated or were still enrolled in the System six years later.*

Of the students starting college at a USG regional university or a state university, 55.4 percent and 44.5 percent, respectively, have graduated or are still enrolled after 6 years.

All first-year retention rate gaps between sectors increased substantially by the end of the sixth year, i.e., through the seventh fall term. The gap between research universities and regional universities increased the most in 6 years, from 8.1 to 19.6 percent. But the gap between the highest persistence rates (research universities) and the lowest (two-year colleges) is 46.3 percentage points, or more than one and one-half times the lower rate, 28.7 percent.

### The National Context

To obtain a broader perspective on the preceding University System multiple-year student retention data, one should compare the USG's persistence rates with those of other colleges and universities across the country. There are no national data on student retention collected by IPEDS. The most comprehensive multi-institutional, inter-state data on student persistence are available from the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) at the University of Oklahoma (see Appendix B).

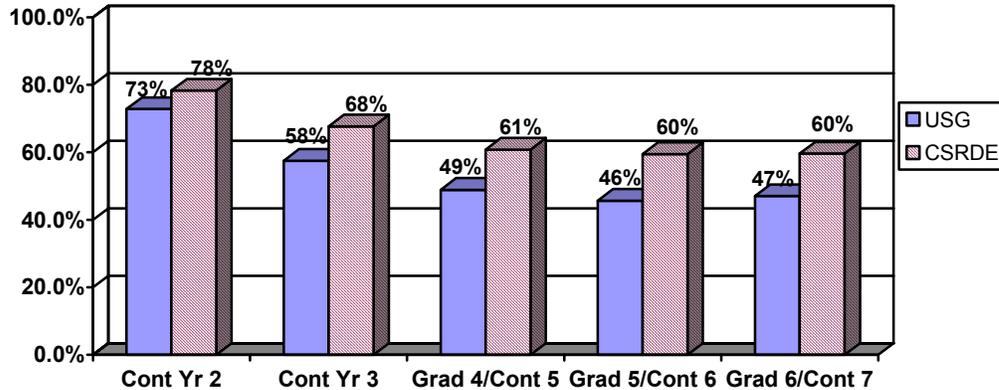
CSRDE collects both multiple-year continuation (retention) and bachelor's degree graduation rates for approximately 80 percent of the first-time, full-time freshmen attending public four-year institutions in the U.S. The University System of Georgia's bachelor's degree-granting institutions are members of CSRDE.

*The most comprehensive multi-institutional, inter-state data on student persistence are available from the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) at the University of Oklahoma.*

It should be noted that there are two important differences between the CSRDE data and the data presented above. First, the cohort definition for CSRDE includes only first-time, full-time freshmen pursuing a *bachelor's degree*, and the preceding USG cohort includes students seeking *any* certificate or degree. Second, the preceding data included USG two-year colleges; CSRDE does not survey two-year institutions; and there is no comparable two-year college data source.

So, using CSRDE and the corresponding USG data, the following analysis compares the multiple-year retention and graduation (persistence) rates of the University System's 18 CSRDE member institutions with the corresponding rates of the other 300 public bachelor's degree-granting colleges and universities in CSRDE.

**Figure 3**  
**Multiple-Year Retention and Graduation Rates**  
**1996 First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Cohort**  
**USG and CSRDE**



The last column in Figure 3 shows the “bottom line” comparison through six years from matriculation: 47 percent of University System of Georgia bachelor’s degree-seeking students in the survey cohort have graduated or are still enrolled, compared to 60 percent of the comparable students enrolled in the 318 CSRDE public institutions. Thus, 13 percentage points more, or a more than one-fourth greater proportion of the CSRDE cohort than the corresponding USG cohort, have persisted through six years.

There are also disparities between CSRDE and USG in the proportion of their persistence rates that are attributable to graduation alone. The following table summarizes those disparities.

|             | <u>CSRDE</u>     |                       | <u>USG</u>       |                       |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Rate</i> | <i>Graduated</i> | <i>Still Enrolled</i> | <i>Graduated</i> | <i>Still Enrolled</i> |
| Four-Year   | 28.0%            | 32.8%                 | 18.1%            | 30.8%                 |
| Five-Year   | 48.7%            | 10.8%                 | 35.0%            | 10.7%                 |
| Six-Year    | 54.6%            | 5.0%                  | 41.3%            | 5.8%                  |

The graduation proportion of the overall persistence rate becomes predominant in the fifth year for both CSRDE and the USG, but for years 4 through 6, graduation is a larger component of the overall rate for CSRDE than it is for USG institutions. Also, the “still enrolled” percentages shown above do not support the hypothesis that “it just takes longer to earn a degree in the University System of Georgia than elsewhere in the nation,” because they do not reflect a larger percentage of students still enrolled and pursuing bachelor’s degrees in the USG than in peer institutions across the nation.

***Persistence and Academic Selectivity***

Because so many student characteristics that affect persistence can be represented by academic preparation, CSRDE also groups institutions by admissions selectivity, as indicated by the average composite SAT scores of entering freshmen. The selectivity categories are:

|                       | <u>SAT Scores</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Highly Selective:     | >1100             |
| Selective:            | 1045-1100         |
| Moderately Selective: | 990-1044          |
| Less Selective:       | <990              |

Based on 1996 SAT data, the USG institutions are categorized by that method as follows:

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Highly Selective (S1):     | Georgia Institute of Technology<br>University of Georgia  |
| Selective (S2):            | North Georgia College & State University<br>Southern Polytechnic State University   |
| Moderately Selective (S3): | Georgia State University<br>Kennesaw State University   |
| Less Selective: (S4)       | Albany State University<br>Armstrong Atlantic State University<br>Augusta State University<br>Clayton College & State University<br>Columbus State University<br>Fort Valley State University<br>Georgia College & State University<br>Georgia Southern University<br>Georgia Southwestern State University<br>Savannah State University<br>State University of West Georgia<br>Valdosta State University |

It is important to note that the above selectivity ratings are based on Fall 1996 entering freshman SAT scores. Multiple-year analysis requires an earlier student cohort, but several USG institutions will be in different selectivity categories when more recent cohorts are analyzed.

Comparing the USG and CSRDE data by selectivity category provides further comparative insights into student persistence and success in the University System of Georgia.

**Figure 4**  
**Multiple-Year Retention and Graduation Rates**  
**1996 First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Cohort**  
**USG and CSRDE Highly Selective Institutions**

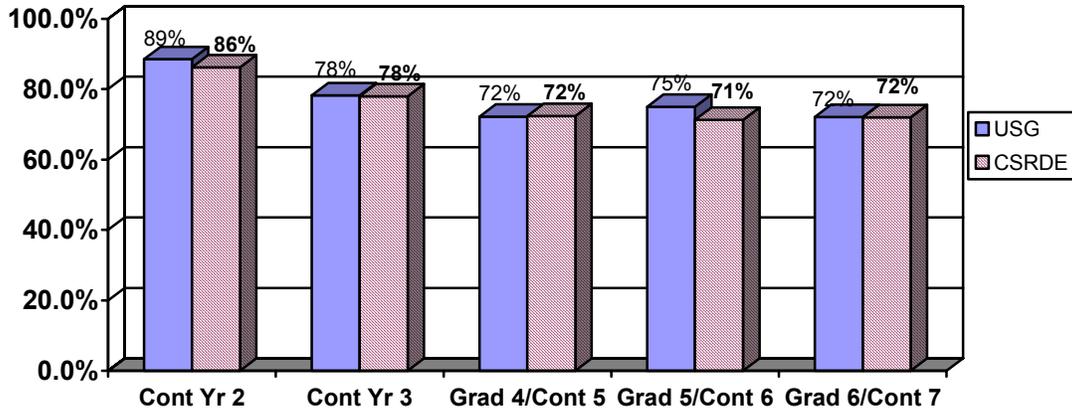
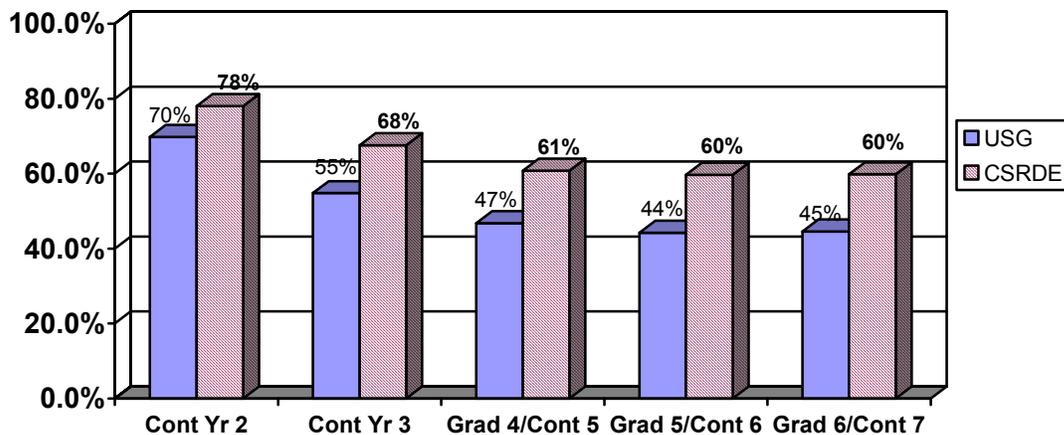
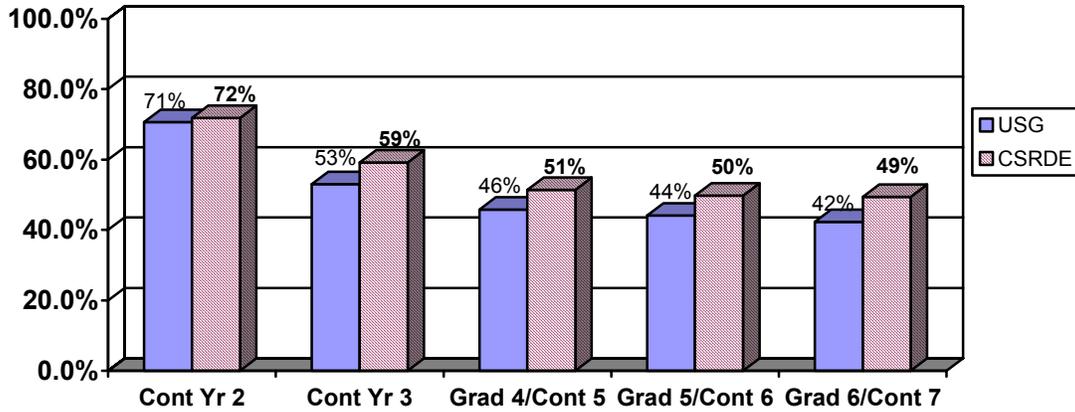


Figure 4 shows that with a combined average SAT score of 1221, well above the *Highly Selective* category threshold, University of Georgia's and Georgia Institute of Technology's persistence rates are at or slightly above the comparative CSRDE levels throughout the six-year period. However, as shown in Figure 5, the System's two *Selective* institutions, North Georgia College & State University and Southern Polytechnic State University, have a combined average SAT of 1050, just 5 points above the category threshold and 14 points lower than the corresponding CSRDE average. Their combined persistence rates are 8 percentage points below the respective CSRDE average in the first year and 15 percentage points lower through six years.

**Figure 5**  
**Multiple-Year Retention and Graduation Rates**  
**1996 First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Cohort**  
**USG and CSRDE Selective Institutions**

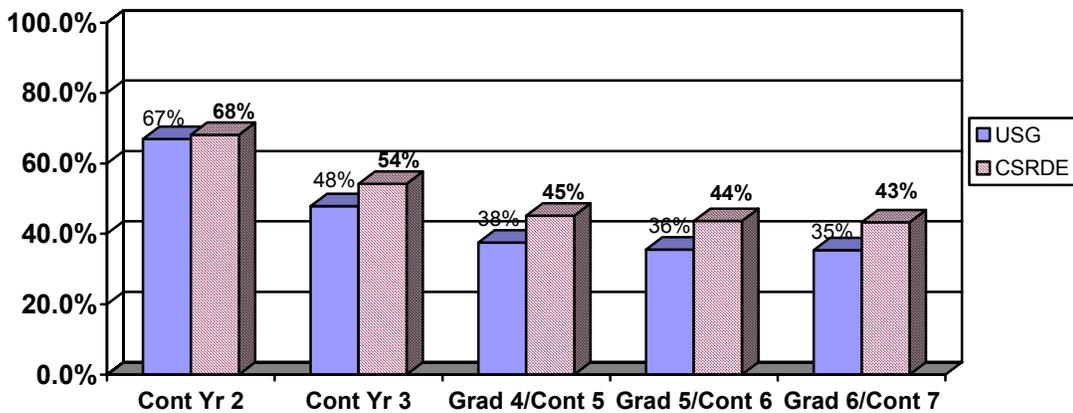


**Figure 6**  
**Multiple-Year Retention and Graduation Rates**  
**1996 First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Cohort**  
**USG and CSRDE Moderately Selective Institutions**



Although the average SAT scores of the *Moderately Selective* and *Less Selective* USG institutions are slightly higher than the corresponding CSRDE category scores, Figures 6 and 7 show that the corresponding continuation rates are within one percentage point in the first year, but that the gap in persistence rates (i.e., combined continuation and graduation rates) has grown significantly by year six.

**Figure 7**  
**Multiple-Year Retention and Graduation Rates**  
**1996 First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Cohort**  
**USG and CSRDE Less Selective Institutions**



## Summary and Conclusions

The internal University System data show that of every 100 degree- or certificate-seeking first-time, full-time students who enter a USG institution, about 61 do not graduate, nor are they still enrolled after six years. The differences among the sectors within the USG are dramatic. Whereas 3 out of 4 first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students who matriculate at a System research university graduate or are still enrolled after six years, almost the same proportion who enter the USG through a two-year college are neither graduated nor enrolled after six years.

The data presented above show that long-term USG retention/graduation rates are not as high as rates in other states. The six-year persistence rates of a more focused cohort, first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year and higher institutions, are compared with their counterparts in other states. That comparison matched USG institutions with out-of-state peers based on CSRDE's SAT-based categories of selectivity. That is, average freshman cohort SAT scores are used as proxy for other academic qualifications of entering freshmen that collectively indicate their potential for college success.

*Except for the research university sector, USG's bachelor degree-granting universities retain and graduate a substantially smaller proportion of their first-time, full-time bachelor degree-seeking students over six years than their out-of-state peers.*

In the out-of-state comparison, the University System's two most selective institutions, University of Georgia and Georgia Institute of Technology, retain and graduate students at the same rate as their out-of-state (CSRDE) peers. However, the USG institutions in the other three categories do not have rates comparable to their respective peers, with the greatest six-year deficit, 15 percentage points, experienced by the USG's only two *Selective* institutions.

Institutional selectivity plays two roles in this analysis. On the one hand, the persistence rates of USG institutions are predictable across University System sectors, from the highest rates at research universities to the lowest at two-year colleges. In the comparison of USG institutions with their peers in other states, the use of SAT-based selectivity peer groups strengthens the relevance of the comparisons.

On the other hand, while variations in retention rates within the USG generally follow institutional selectivity, and selectivity strengthens external comparisons, it does not explain the disparity between most USG institutions and their external peers. Why do USG institutions retain and graduate students at a consistently lower rate than external institutions admitting the same caliber of first-time students?

There are many factors other than academic preparedness that contribute to student persistence, but there are no known differences by state or region in the distribution or occurrence of such factors. There are currently no research results to explain these differences.

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