VARIABLES PREDICTIVE OF...

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TIME FROM LAST ENROLLMENT
This variable measured the amount of time from when a Comebacker last stopped out to the first time they engaged with the Network, in essence a proxy for how long it had been since the Comebacker had last been a student. If a Comebacker engaged with the Network less than 5 months after they last stopped out or if they engaged with the Network already enrolled (i.e., 0 months), they were more likely to enroll or remain enrolled if already a student. Similarly, Comebackers who engaged with the Network less than 5 months after they had last stopped out were more likely to graduate. In short, having momentum, or at least a very recent college experience, was predictive of successful outcomes.

STATUS UPON NETWORK ENGAGEMENT
This variable described Comebackers’ status upon engaging with a Network program: were they part of the “some college, no degree” population, having completed a single term, multiple terms, or two years’ worth of enrollment; were they already enrolled but at risk of stopping out; or, had they already earned a credential and were looking to earn another? As with the above variable, Comebackers who engaged with the Network already enrolled were more likely to remain enrolled and twice as likely to graduate.

CURRENTLY DEFAULTED STUDENT LOANS?
This variable comes from a question Network programs ask at intake. It is a proxy for a Comebackers’ financial status at a critical juncture in their education journey. For students who answered “not sure,” the longer it had been since they engaged with the Network, the more time they had to address any default debt and, therefore, the more likely they were to enroll and also to graduate.

ACADEMIC AREA OF INTEREST
This variable comes from a question asked by Network programs at intake, so answers given were not necessarily the actual academic area they eventually pursued. Rather, they were more of an indicator of mindset. For the enrollment model, naming an academic area that had restrictive or moderately restrictive program requirements—engineering/math, education, criminal justice, and accounting—was predictive of enrollment, while naming an academic area that had less restrictive program requirements—such as liberal arts—or answering “undecided,” were more predictive of graduation, suggesting that being flexible in mindset led to successful outcomes. This finding is one we intend to delve into more deeply through qualitative research.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT US?
This variable comes from a question asked at intake and can be viewed as a proxy for the Comebacker’s support system and underlying motivations. Comebackers who heard about the program from a college advisor were more likely to enroll and also to graduate. Also, answering that they heard about the program from a newspaper (possibly by reading Comebacker success stories) was predictive of both enrollment and graduation.

Next Steps
Moving forward, we will continue to build out our study set as Comebackers we already work with move through the pipeline and new Comebackers request help from Network programs. We also will continue to update our study set with NSC enrollment and graduation records, a process we undertake twice a year. As our quantitative analysis has helped us understand what things are playing out as they are, we are now moving into a qualitative phase where we will attempt to understand why things are playing out as they are. This phase will include a general population survey; targeted interviews with Comebackers who enrolled; and focus groups with Comebackers who graduated. Stay tuned for future research summaries that feature the findings of our on-going analysis.

Policy makers and practitioners are increasingly interested in the varied learning pathways of adults, especially those who have earned some college credit but did not complete a degree their first time around. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), 31 million adults in the US have earned some college credit but no degree.1 Very few data sets capture the entire adult degree completion continuum, from pre-enrollment decisions and preparation to completion, including the paths of those who “stopped out.” Yet, in order to act systematically, we need better quantitative and qualitative data, analyses, and interpretation reflecting the trajectories of adults who return to school—we call them Comebackers—across and within institutions and the regional geographies where they live, work, and study. In partnership, The Graduate! Network and New America are producing research that improves our understanding of the complex interactions of interventions, individual experiences and behaviors, systems, and outcomes in the ecosystem of adult college degree completion.

Data That Move Us
The Data That Move Us project creates a more robust mining, analysis, interpretation, and reporting system in support of The Graduate! Network’s mission to boost adult college degree completion and New America’s goal to improve educational outcomes among historically disadvantaged people. The project pulls together client-level data from the Network’s community member programs, which capture a unique life cycle of experiences and connections, from pre-enrollment through graduation. We combine these field data with NSC student level enrollment and graduation records, and then analyze the combined study set for important insights.

Identifying Pathways and Predictive Factors
This research summary takes a closer look at ten communities in the Network representing a range of development stages: from mature programs in Philadelphia and Cleveland, to more recently formed programs in Kansas City, MO, and Rhode Island.2 By taking a closer look at these communities, we sought to understand how adults with some college credit but no degree, or those with a certificate or two-year degree, were returning to school and, in many instances, successfully completing a credential, usually a degree. With close to 9,000 Comebackers in our study set,3 our research was guided by three general questions:

• Who wants to complete a degree?
• Of those who went on to enroll (after engaging with the Network) and graduate, what pathways did they travel to reach degree completion?
• What factors were predictive of enrollment (after Network engagement) and graduation?

To answer these questions, records from the ten Network communities were combined with NSC enrollment and graduation records (where a match could be made). NSC records were obtained for two time spans: 1) a period of up to 20 years prior to the Comebacker engaging with a Network program; and, 2) the period of time after they engaged with a Network program up to Spring 2019. These two time spans gave us a broader look for each Comebacker in the study set.

A total of 51 variables were developed as the basis of the analysis, categorized into five general areas:

• Demographics, such as age, gender, family annual income, and race/ethnicity;
• Education history prior to engaging with a Network program, including how many terms they completed;
• Underlying motivations and interests for going back to school;
• Movement along the “lifecycle” pathway, from the pre-enrollment period, through to enrollment (post-engagement), and ultimately, for some; graduation; and,
• Program interventions, particularly the extent and quality of contact program advisors had with Comebackers.

1 NSC Research Center, Signature Report 7, Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion, July 2014.

2 The ten communities in our study set (along with the year they joined the Network) were: Albuquerque, NM (2015); Cleveland, OH (2016); Greensboro, NC (2014); Kansas City, MO (2016); Louisville, KY (2015); Philadelphia, PA (2007); Rhode Island (2013); St. Louis, MO (2015); San Antonio, TX (2014); and, Spokane, WA (2010). The exact number of students in our study set was 8,880.

3 It should be noted, as the longest running program in the Network, the Philadelphia program makes up the largest share of the study set: 41% of all client records and 75% of Comebackers already enrolled and at risk of stopping out or who learned about it at a college fair were more likely to enroll and graduate. Also, answering that they heard about the program from a newspaper (possibly by reading Comebacker success stories) was predictive of both enrollment and graduation.

For more information, contact the DTMU project team at DTMU@graduate-network.org.
The Graduate! Network’s focus is on adults who have some prior history of enrollment but did not reach completion of a bachelor’s level degree, and now they are interested in returning to school to complete their degree. The majority of adults who engaged with a Network program (61%) fit the generally accepted definition of “some college, no degree” (Figure 1), though even within this group the level of completed enrollment prior to engaging with the Network varied significantly (Figure 2):

- Fourteen percent (14%) had completed only a single term of enrollment.
- Forty-five percent (45%) had completed multiple terms of enrollment, but cumulatively less than two years’ worth; and,
- Forty-three percent (43%) were “potential completers,” NSC’s term for students who had completed at least two years’ worth of enrollment but not a degree.

Interestingly, the Network’s breakdown was very different from NSC’s analysis of the entire US “some college, no degree” population: at the national level, 32% of students who did not graduate completed a single term, 56% completed multiple terms, and 12% completed two years’ worth of enrollment (i.e., potential completers). 1 The fact that potential completers, who have the shortest distance to travel to complete a degree, were engaging with the Network at a greater proportion than the national share should be taken as a promising sign.

As interesting, one in 10 students (10%) engaging with the Network was already enrolled in a school but was at risk of stopping out (Figure 1) and, therefore, was seeking guidance and assistance from a Network program. These students might have been struggling academically or financially, or they were facing non-academic challenges related to childcare, transportation, or other challenges that were derailing their enrollment status. In a very real sense, these adults were well on their way to joining the “some college, no degree” ranks without assistance from Network programs.

Similarly, one in five (21%) students engaged with a Network program having already earned a credential, usually a certificate or an Associate degree, and were seeking another degree. The post-secondary landscape, which now includes extensive online course offerings and programs, has become increasingly complex, and many of these students were seeking guidance and support to navigate it. A small percentage (8%) engaged with a Network program, but we could not identify an NSC record of enrollment. In some cases, this was because the student enrolled in a school but did not successfully complete a single term; in other cases, we were unable to match records likely due to name changes over time.

**Question 2: What pathways did Comebackers travel to graduation?**

For traditional students, the pathway to graduation starts in the college freshman year and is characterized by continuous, full-time enrollment until graduation. Indeed, the concept of persistence—defined as a student returning to college for a second year of enrollment—is generally associated with retention (from the institution’s standpoint).3 The majority of adults who engaged with the Network and graduated4 were able to follow this traditional pathway (Figure 3, Pathway 2). Once enrolled, 68% of Comebackers stayed continuously enrolled as they completed their degree. On average, it took them 1.6 years to go from first enrollment to graduation (Figure 4, Pathway 2), though many were not going full time: their average weighted enrollment intensity was 0.69 full-time equivalent (FTE).

But that does not tell the whole story. We found three other distinct pathways to successful graduation:

- Thirty percent (13%) upon enrolling for the first time were immediately conferred a degree by the institution (Figure 3, Pathway 1), suggesting they overcame some type of administrative hurdle—perhaps they filed needed paperwork or cleared outstanding fees or debt. We call these “immediate graduations.”
- Another 14% successfully completed a degree but had one stop-out along the way to graduation (Figure 3, Pathway 3). On average, students with one stop-out took 3.5 years from first enrollment to graduation, including an average of one year in stop-out. Their average weighted enrollment intensity was 0.63 FTE (Figure 4, Pathway 3).
- The remaining 5% had two or more stop-outs on the way to graduation (Figure 3, Pathway 4). The average time from first enrollment to graduation for students with two stop-outs was 4.8 years and even longer for students who stopped out more than two times (Figure 4, Pathway 4). Graduates with more than two stop-outs had average weighted enrollment intensity closer to half-time: 0.54 FTE for three stop-outs and 0.52 FTE for four stop-outs.

This analysis makes it clear: starts and stops are not unusual for our population. A Comebacker who has stopped out is not necessarily a drop-out. Indeed, there may be very good reasons for a Comebacker to have periods of non-enrollment on their way to graduation and to take more time to complete their program. This finding calls for broadening our thinking on what it means to be persistent, allowing room for these additional pathways to graduation.

**Question 3: What factors were predictive of enrollment and graduation?**

We also ran our study set through a “decision trees” model, looking for factors that were predictive of two outcome variables: 1) enrollment (after engaging with a Network program) and 2) graduation. For both outcome variables, the same factor was most predictive: the length of time a Comebacker had been engaged with the Network. In short, the longer a Comebacker had engaged with a Network program, the more likely they were to have enrolled (or remain enrolled if already a student) and the more likely they were to have graduated. This finding makes sense: many Comebackers need time and assistance to sort out issues—finding the right program, preparing academically, addressing financial issues including outstanding and defaulted debt, transferring credit—before returning to school and successfully completing their degree.

As it turns out, the next five predictive factors for each model were the same variables, though ranked in a slightly different order and with nuances in the aspects of the variable that made them predictive:
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4 For a longer discussion on persistence, read our blog post “The Incomplete Picture of What Works for Returning College Students,” at NewAmerican.org.
5 Adults Returning to and Graduating from College: Pathways and Predictive Factors Prepared by Data That Move Us: A Joint Project of The Graduate! Network and New America Funded by Lumina Foundation.

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