

**SOUTH DAKOTA BOARD OF REGENTS**

**Full Board**

**AGENDA ITEM: 20**

**DATE: June 10-11, 2015**

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**SUBJECT: SDOS Persistence Analysis**

This report summarizes a recent effort to investigate – using National Student Clearinghouse data – the relative propensity of South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship recipients in the Regental system to persist toward degree completion.

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**RECOMMENDED ACTION OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Information only.



\*\*\* Special Data Analysis \*\*\*

## SDOS Persistence Analysis

After more than a decade in operation, the South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship (SDOS) program has provided funding to more than 12,000 students studying in South Dakota colleges and universities. A merit-based program, the scholarship provides \$5,000 in financial support to qualifying students who maintain academic eligibility through all four years of postsecondary study.<sup>1</sup> This analysis examines persistence data for SDOS recipients, and reveals that these students are dramatically more likely – even in comparison with other high-achieving students – to persist toward degree completion.

### Data Notes

Analyses of graduation rates typically focus on degree completions that occur within six years of initial enrollment (for bachelor’s degree-seeking students). Accordingly, this analysis examines the cohort of Regental students who began their studies in the university system in Fall 2008. More specifically, this analysis includes all first-time, full-time, bachelor’s degree-seeking students from the Fall 2008 edition of the SDBOR High School Transition Report cohort. This group comprises only those students who entered the university system directly after graduating from a high school in South Dakota

To track the persistence of these students – including those who may have transferred to other universities – a student roster was submitted to the National Student Clearinghouse, a national repository of enrollment data for nearly all American postsecondary institutions. To be counted as “graduated” in this analysis, a student must have completed a four-year degree at any four-year institution within six years of initial enrollment (i.e., by August of 2014). To be considered “still enrolled,” a student must have been enrolled (at least part-time) at any four-year institution during the Fall 2014 term.

### Analysis

A total of 2,652 students from South Dakota high schools began a bachelor’s degree program in the Regental system in Fall 2008. Prior to analysis, this student cohort was segmented into three subgroups:

- (1) *SDOS* Students receiving a South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship award ( $n=907$ )
- (2) *nSDOS* Students with an ACT score  $\geq 24$ , but *not* receiving SDOS<sup>2</sup> ( $n=356$ )
- (3) *Other* Students *not* receiving SDOS and did *not* earn an ACT score  $\geq 24$  ( $n=1,389$ )

Of the total cohort, 34.2 percent were SDOS recipients, 13.4 percent were not SDOS recipients despite earning a qualifying ACT score, and 52.3 percent neither received nor qualified for an SDOS award.

<sup>1</sup> In 2015, this amount was raised to \$6,500 for students first receiving a scholarship after July 1, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> This ACT scoring threshold (24) is the composite score required to establish initial SDOS eligibility. It is important to note, however, that a qualifying ACT composite score is only one of several requirements for SDOS eligibility.

Figure 1 displays six-year persistence outcomes for students in all three groups, and suggests a striking divergence between SDOS recipients and all other students. Six years after initially enrolling at a Regental university, nearly nine in ten members (88.5 percent) of the *SDOS* group either had graduated or were still enrolled in a postsecondary institution.<sup>3</sup> For the *nSDOS* and *Other* groups, only about six in ten students had similarly persisted.

**Figure 1**  
Six-Year Persistence by Group

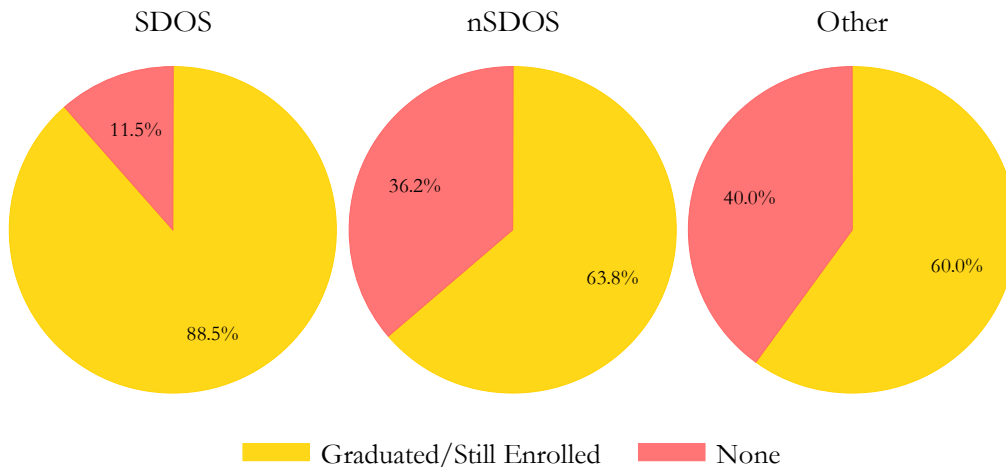
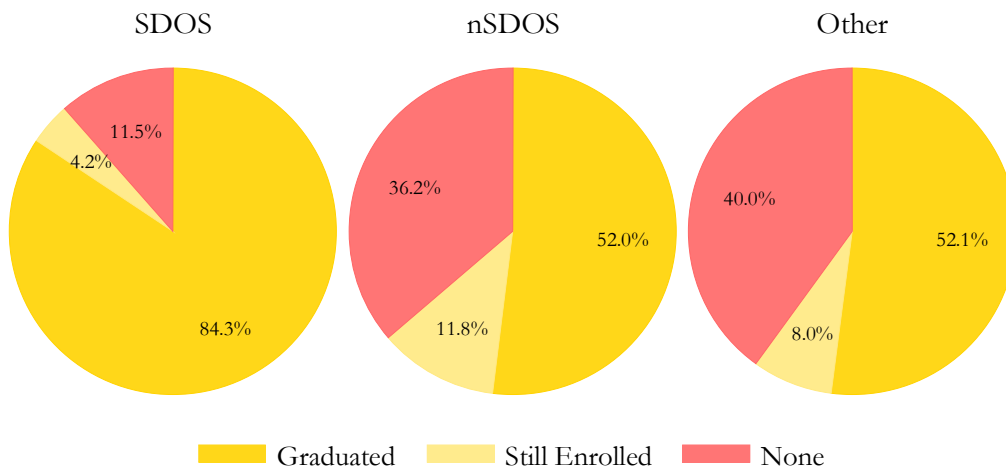


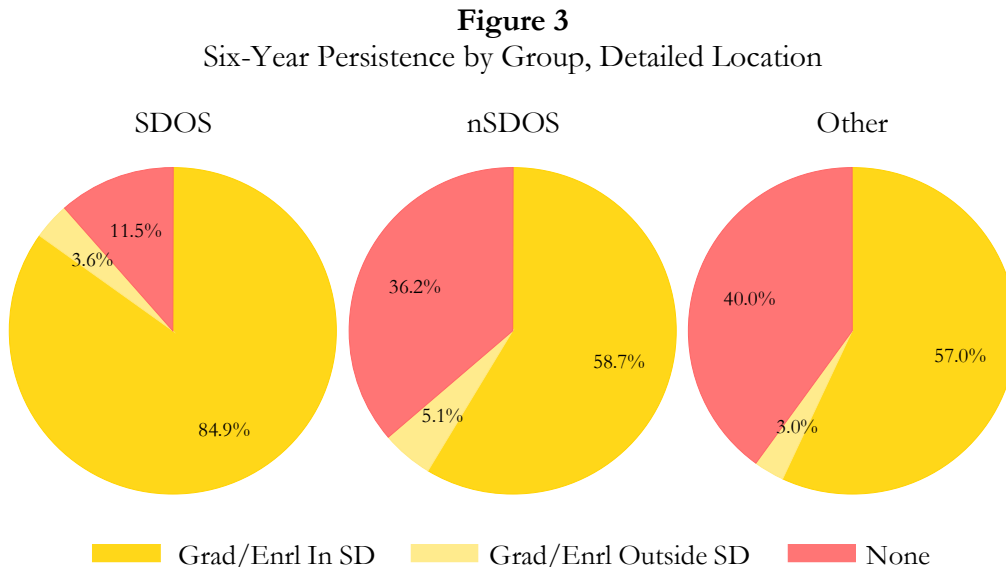
Figure 2 shows detailed information about the persistence outcomes of each group. More than 80 percent of *SDOS* students had graduated (as opposed to remaining enrolled) within six years of initial enrollment, compared to just over half of all other students. Again, the gap between the *nSDOS* and *Other* groups is marginal.

**Figure 2**  
Six-Year Persistence by Group, Detailed Outcomes



<sup>3</sup> Again, this analysis includes enrollments and degree completions at institutions other than the starting university.

Lastly, Figure 3 summarizes – by group – the tendency of students to persist in in-state institutions, as opposed to transferring to colleges and universities in other states. Data again indicate a profound disparity between Opportunity Scholarship recipients and all other students. As shown below, approximately 84.9 percent of students in the *SDOS* group either graduated from or were still enrolled in an in-state postsecondary institution six years after entry. The same was true for just under sixty percent of students in the *nSDOS* and *Other* groups.



In summary, South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship recipients appear – in comparison with other students – dramatically more likely to persist toward degree completion. This tendency likely owes to the convergence of a number of interrelated factors. First, and put simply, SDOS recipients represent South Dakota’s highest-achieving and most academically promising scholars. These students have excelled across a range of academic subjects during their high school careers, as demonstrated both in high school coursework and in subsequent achievement testing. Indeed, extensive exposure to a variety of academic areas is required under the eligibility criteria of the program. As a consequence, these students are especially well-positioned to negotiate the broad demands of a postsecondary degree program.

Second, SDOS recipients are required under the terms of their scholarship awards to make adequate progress toward on-time graduation. Continued eligibility in the SDOS program is conditioned upon completing a requisite number of credit hours each year, as well as maintaining an acceptable grade point average. By failing to meet these eligibility benchmarks, students risk the loss of all future SDOS funding.

Third, that SDOS recipients are more likely than other students to remain in in-state institutions is consistent with the basic parameters (and intent) of the scholarship program. Since SDOS funding is available only to students enrolled in accredited in-state institutions, recipients will naturally be less inclined to transfer to an institution in another state. In most cases, the incentive to remain in an in-state institution will far outweigh the possible incentives to leave.

As to the observed persistence gap between SDOS recipients and their seeming academic peers (i.e., the *nSDOS* group), it should be reiterated that SDOS awards are premised on academic qualifications that reach far beyond a single ACT score. SDOS awards reflect a high school career-long commitment by students to navigate a rigorous and comprehensive college-preparatory curriculum. Students in the *nSDOS* comparison group, by contrast, may lack extensive background in one or more academic subjects, a deficiency that may be masked by a single ACT score. This possibility is confirmed by the current data, which reveal a greater likelihood of SDOS recipients to meet all four ACT college readiness benchmarks.<sup>4</sup> This distinction, along with the observations made above, help to underscore the importance of the scholarship program's comprehensive eligibility rules.

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<sup>4</sup> In the analyzed dataset, 73.0 percent of *SDOS* group members met all four ACT college readiness benchmarks, compared with 66.6 percent of *nSDOS* group members (and only 3.3 percent of students in the *Other* group).