

Student Success in Graduation Rates and Retention/Persistence Rates

Rationale for Student Success in Graduation Rates and Retention/Persistence rates from the NOBTS and Leavell College Mission Statement – The Mission Statement of NOBTS and Leavell College, revised in 2019, is “to prepare students to walk with Christ, proclaim His truth, and fulfill His mission.” We are convinced that trained, well-equipped ministers are more effective than those who lack this training. Students who complete their degree requirements are better equipped than those who take just a few credit hours. Also, those with complete degrees become eligible to take advanced degrees, to become better prepared to “proclaim His truth.”

Definitions of Terms – In order to understand the narrative that follows, it is important to understand how we are defining some key terms:

- Graduation rate: represents students who have graduated with the 200% time frame (i.e. 8 years for the BA student, considering that a full-time student would graduate in 4 years)
- Currently enrolled: represents students who have not yet graduated but are within the 200% time frame (i.e. a BA student who is 6 years into his degree and has taken courses at least one semester each year within the 200% time frame for his degree)
- Persistence rate: represents students who are still taking courses, at least one course each academic year, but who have exceeded the 200% time frame (i.e. the BA student who is still plugging along 10 years after starting his degree with us)
- Student success rate: represents students who have either graduated or are still persisting, i.e., those who have not dropped out or transferred
- Threshold: represents the minimum of student graduation rates, currently enrolled, persisting, and succeeding, that is deemed acceptable by NOBTS and Leavell College. It is what we understand as a minimum, not an aspirational goal.

We determined the 200% graduation rates as shown in the chart below:

Degree	100% Rate	200% rate
AA	2 years	4 years
BA	4 years	8 years
MA<45	3 years	6 years
MA>45	4 years	8 years
MDiv	4 years	8 years
Professional Doctorates	4 years	8 years
Research Doctorates	5 years	10 years

Rationale for the Criteria/Threshold for Student Success in Graduation Rates, Retention/Persistence Rates, and Student Success Rates – Student retention and graduation rates are more complex at NOBTS and Leavell College than at a typical undergraduate or graduate institution.

- (a) First of all, NOBTS and Leavell College do not have high academic admission requirements. The main requirements are a statement of call to ministry and a church endorsement, along with the prerequisite academic degrees. We do not require ACT or SAT scores for undergraduate admission, or anything more than a minimal GPA for graduate admission. Particularly in Leavell College, we have a number of post-traditional students who felt a call to ministry later in life, and thus have not been in academic institutions for many years. Many of them are from oral culture traditions in which they are the first person in their family to go to college, including many of our undergraduate prison programs. This lack of preparation obviously impacts their retention rate. However, we do have higher admission standards in a few more academically focused master's and doctoral degrees, and the retention rate is higher for those degrees.
- (b) Second, the majority of our students are part-time students because they already are working at least one job. Unlike many church traditions, Baptist churches do not require an academic degree for ordination. Therefore, the majority of our students already are serving in a ministry position and/or a secular work position. Time is their greatest challenge. This is particularly a challenge for bi-vocational ministers, who comprise at least 25% of all Southern Baptist pastors. These students serve in both a secular position and a ministry position. NOBTS's Caskey Center for Church Excellence specifically targets these students for scholarships. Even with a full scholarship, these students do not have time to take a full-time load. Also, each of our extension centers has a limited offering of courses each semester, typically just nine hours per semester.
- (c) Likewise, online students tend to take fewer credit hours due to the higher cost. Some students are delayed by life situations or financial limitations requiring them to sit out a semester or two occasionally. In a typical academic year, undergraduate students averaged 16.6 credit hours for the year. The 121-hour BA degree, then,

would take nearly 7.5 years to complete at that rate. Graduate students averaged taking just 12.2 credit hours per year. Since our standard Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree requires 84 credit hours, it would take the average graduate student nearly 7 years to complete the degree, long after full-time students would complete it. Some take as long as a dozen years to complete the degree.

Graduation Rate Thresholds – In general, the thresholds for each category are developed to be consistent with our mission statement, to reflect on historical patterns in this area, and when possible, to compare our results with national benchmarks. The thresholds initially are recommended by the Institutional Assessment staff in consultation with the academic leaders who have oversight in that area. These recommendations are presented to the NOBTS Assessment Oversight Committee for approval.

NOBTS has historically used the 150% length from the standard IPEDS graduation rates (allowing 6 years for a 4-year degree). However, NOBTS has chosen to utilize the IPEDS Contours graduation rates since its 200% length (allowing 8 years for a 4-year degree) is more reasonable and realistic to our student population. Over the summer of 2020, we implemented a new student information system, allowing us the use of the 200% length that we prefer. When comparing this year's data to previous years' data, one must keep in mind the difference from 150% to 200%. This change in percentage may account for the following changes:

- (a) The increase in time allowed for higher graduation rates as students have more time to complete their degrees. With the exception of the DEdMin, all of our programs saw increases, some substantial, in the graduation rate.
- (b) The increase in time led to decreases in the percentage of students currently enrolled and persisting. With more time to graduate, fewer students no longer needed to persist in the program. This year's data reflect such a decrease in all programs except the DEdMin program.
- (c) The DEdMin program typically is a small cohort, so any change in student status results in a larger percentage change. This small cohort could account for the DEdMin program becoming somewhat of a trend-breaker in this year's data.

A recent IPEDS survey (as reported at a SACSCOC presentation by Alexei Matveev in 2018) is 23% for the associate degree and 47% for the baccalaureate degree. Several factors lead us to anticipate that NOBTS and Leavell College students will have lower graduation rates than the national average:

- (a) Most students are part-time students, working in a ministry or secular job.
- (b) Our two standard degrees are 84 credit hours (MDiv) and 121 hours (BA), which are challenging for part-time students.
- (c) Most of our degrees do not require high GPAs or standardized test scores for admission.

However, the shorter, more academically-focused degrees with higher admissions standards tend to have higher graduation rates.

NOBTS established its thresholds by noting the graduation rates in IPEDS and other Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accredited institutions and by looking at our own patterns of graduation rates. In light of this data, the graduation rates are recommended by the Institutional Assessment staff in consultation with the Provost and relevant program Deans and approved by the Assessment Oversight Committee and the President's Cabinet.

Graduation rates in master's and professional doctoral degree programs in institutions accredited by the ATS over five years are figured at 200% of the time of the degree, as shown in the following chart. In this comparison using data from the 2019-2020 academic year, NOBTS had higher graduation rates than other Evangelical seminaries in the Professional MA, Academic MA, and PhD degrees, but much lower rates in the longer MDiv degree and the Professional Doctoral degrees. The Professional MA degrees were 14% above the average Evangelical school; the Academic MAs were 10% above the average Evangelical school; and the PhD was 19% above the average Evangelical school. The Professional Doctoral degree was 17% below

the average Evangelical school, and the NOBTS MDiv graduation rate of 27% was 24% below fellow Evangelical schools in the ATS. The lower comparable numbers at NOBTS are due primarily to the proclivity of many of our students to be part-time – hence our moving to the 200% IPEDS Contours rate, which tells a more accurate story of our student population.

In comparison to a sister SBC seminary, our graduation rates for the Professional MA degrees, the ProDoc degrees, and the PhD were higher. The Professional MAs were 5% higher than our sister seminary, the ProDoc degrees were 8% higher, and the PhD was 46% higher. The Academic MAs were nearly the same as our sister seminary, only 1% lower. However, the longer MDiv was 17% lower than the sister seminary. Again, we attribute the lower numbers to our students’ tendency towards part-time status, thus our move to the 200% rate.

Graduation Rates by Degree and Ecclesial Family

Degree	NOBTS	A Sister SBC Seminary	All ATS Seminaries	Evangelical Seminaries
MDiv	27%	44%	62%	51%
Prof MA in . . .	63%	58%	54%	49%
Acad MA (Disc)	38%	39%	54%	48%
ProDoc	60%	52%	48%	43%
ThM		50%	54%	44%
PhD	71%	25%	48%	52%

**Information taken from 2019-2021 ATS Strategic Information Report for NOBTS and figured at 200%.*

Therefore, although our aspirational goals are higher, taking into account our historic patterns of graduation rates and comparing ourselves with sister institutions as a baseline, our realistic thresholds for graduation rates based on prior performance are as follows:

- 10% graduation rate for the associate degree (Leavell College)
- 30% graduation rate for the baccalaureate degree (Leavell College)
- 30% graduation rate for the MDiv graduate degree
- 30% graduation rate for the shorter (<45 hours) non-MDiv graduate degrees
- 40% graduation rate for the longer (>45 hours) non-MDiv graduate degrees

The threshold is higher for our doctoral programs because admission is academically selective, unlike many of our degrees. Therefore, gauged by the pattern of previous years and in comparison with sister institutions, the graduate rate threshold for the doctoral degrees are as follows:

- 30% graduation rate for the DEdMin degree
- 45% graduation rate for the remaining professional doctorate degrees
- 55% graduation rate for the research doctoral degrees

Results in Student Achievement in Graduation Rates (2019-2020)

Degree	Class	Graduation Rate	Graduation Threshold	+/- Threshold	Graduation Goal
AA	2015-2016	13%	10%	+3%	15%
BA	2011-2012	43%	30%	+13%	40%
Master <45	2013-2014	43%	30%	+13%	40%
Master >45	2011-2012	68%	40%	+28%	50%
MDiv	2011-2012	39%	30%	+9%	35%
DEdMin	2011-2012	38%	30%	+8%	35%
DMin	2011-2012	55%	45%	+10%	50%
PhD, EdD, DMA	2009-2010	61%	55%	+6%	60%

Student Persistence Rate Thresholds – As noted earlier, the majority of NOBTS and Leavell College students are essentially part-time students, particularly those taking online classes. Therefore, it is not unusual for active students to be going beyond 200% for the length of their degrees. Enrolled students typically are about half of the total graduate for that student

class and degree. NOBTS has addressed this issue with a “Plus 3” initiative, encouraging students to take 3 more hours per semester so they can graduate earlier. However, credit hours taken by distance students (extension centers and online) still remain rather low per semester. Therefore, in addition to moving to the 200% graduation rates, NOBTS and Leavell College are beginning to track student persistence – that is, 200% plus the students who continue to be enrolled actively in the program beyond the 200% because it seems misleading to discount students who currently are enrolled.

In light of the available data, the persistence rates are recommended by the Institutional Assessment staff in consultation with the Provost and relevant program Deans and approved by the Assessment Oversight Committee and the President’s Cabinet. Because of the increase to 200%, the persistence thresholds decreased substantially in all programs except the associate degree:

- 39% persistence rate for the AA degree
- 09% persistence rate for the BA degree
- 04% persistence rate for the MDiv graduate degree
- 20% persistence rate for the shorter (<45 hours) non-MDiv graduate degree
- 02% persistence rate for the longer (>45 hours) non-MDiv graduate degree
- 0% persistence rate for the DEdMin degree
- 18% persistence rate for the remaining professional doctoral degrees
- 17% persistence rate for the research doctoral degrees

Results in Student Achievement in Retention/Persistence Rates

Degree	Class	Currently Enrolled	Persistence Rate	Persistence Threshold	+/- Threshold	Persistence Goal
AA	2015-16	26%	39%	30%	+9%	35%
BA	2011-12	6%	9%	5%	+4%	10%
Master <45	2013-14	25%	28%	20%	+8%	25%
Master >45	2011-12	1%	1%	2%	+1%	5%
MDiv	2011-12	3%	4%	2%	+2%	5%
DEdMin	2011-12	0%	0%	2%	-2%	5%
DMin	2011-12	10%	18%	10%	+8%	15%
PhD, EdD, DMA	2009-10	9%	17%	10%	+7%	15%

Student Academic Success Rates – To gain a broader perspective of our students’

academic success, we set thresholds for student success rates based on two simple numbers: the dropout rate and the student success rate (the graduation rate plus the persistence rate).

Results in Student Achievement in Student Academic Success Rates

Degree	Class	Dropped Out	Student Success Rate	Student Success Threshold	+/- Threshold	Student Success Goal
AA	2015-16	48%	52%	40%	+12%	50%
BA	2011-12	48%	52%	40%	+12%	50%
Master <45	2013-14	28%	72%	60%	+12%	70%
Master >45	2011-12	31%	69%	60%	+9%	65%
MDiv	2011-12	57%	43%	35%	+8%	40%
DEdMin	2011-12	63%	38%	30%	+8%	35%
DMin	2011-12	27%	73%	60%	+13%	70%
PhD, EdD, DMA	2009-10	22%	78%	60%	+18%	70%

The associate degree dropout rate in 2019-20 was somewhat high, at 48%. The associate graduation rate was just 13%, although the persistence rate was 39%. The IPEDS average was 23%. We believe our dropout rate to be due at least to these four factors:

- (a) associate students tend to be non-traditional, part-time students, some of whom just take one course per semester, and thus do not graduate at the prescribed times;
- (b) those in our prison programs do not receive their diplomas until they receive their BA degrees, so their graduation is delayed at least two years;
- (c) associate degree students at extension centers or online are part-time students who make slow progress toward their degrees; and
- (d) some students enter as associate degree students but decide to pursue the BA degree instead and never formally graduate with the associate degree, a move which our former student information system could not track.

The baccalaureate degree dropout rate was also high, about 48%, but lower than the Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree dropout rate of 57%. The BA degree has a 43% graduation rate, but a 9% persistence rate, which was 3% above the graduation rate threshold and 1% below the persistence rate. However, the graduation rate was 22% below the IPEDS average, though just 4% less than the persistence rate. The MDiv degree had a 39% graduation rate and a 4% persistence rate, which is 1% below the graduation rate threshold and 1% below the persistence rate threshold. Both of these degrees are rather long, 121 hours for the BA and 84 hours for the MDiv. Therefore, the 9% persistence rate in the BA degree and the 4% persistence rate in the MDiv seems reasonable for mostly part-time students. While this level of student achievement is far from ideal, it is reasonable for this makeup of students.

We have divided our shorter master's degrees into two categories based on the number of hours required to complete the degrees: MAs shorter than 45 semester hours and MAs longer than 45 semester hours. These shorter master's degrees have significantly lower dropout rates of 28% and 31% respectively. They have graduation rates of 43% and 68% respectively and

persistence rates of 28% and 1% respectively. The MAs less than 45 hours were 3% over the graduation rate threshold and 3% above the persistence rate threshold. The MAs longer than 45 hours were 1% over the graduation rate threshold and 4% below the persistence rate threshold.

In our professional doctoral programs (DEdMin and DMin), the graduation rates were 38% and 55% respectively, which was 3% (DEdMin) and 5% (DMin) above the anticipated threshold. Student persistence for the DEdMin was 0%, meeting the threshold of 0%. We attribute the 0% persistence threshold due to the fact that students can no longer continue in the program past the 200% mark. Student persistence for the DMin was 18%, which was 3% above the threshold. In the research doctoral programs, the graduation rate was 61%, which was 1% above the threshold, and the persistence rate was 17%, which was 7% above the threshold. The doctoral degree have our best-prepared students and thus have the highest graduation and persistence rates.

Student Success in Employment

Rationale for Student Success in Employment from the NOBTS and Leavell College Mission Statement – The purpose of training at NOBTS and Leavell College is “to prepare servants to walk with Christ, proclaim His truth, and fulfill His mission.” This mission, however, is not limited to full-time vocational ministers. As was mentioned earlier, NOBTS and Leavell College have programs that attract bi-vocational ministers – those who are serving in both a ministry position and a secular job. Many of our students, particularly in certificate programs, are lay ministers in churches or ministries and who have no interest in full-time

vocational service. Therefore, our goal is for successful graduates to serve in some way in a local church or ministry.

Rationale for the Criteria/Threshold for Student Success in Employment – Having theological training generally makes ministry candidates more attractive to churches. Because NOBTS has numerous extension centers across the five southeastern states in addition to internet course accessibility wherever our students are located, NOBTS and Leavell College students can already serve in ministry positions wherever they are without having to move to the main campus. Therefore, the majority of our students are already serving in some ministry position even before graduation. Many students (particularly certificate students) are serving in volunteer positions. They came to NOBTS or Leavell College simply to improve their service in these lay minister positions. Therefore, both paid positions and volunteer positions are taken into account in measuring student success in employment.

In addition to measuring employment of students at the time of graduation, we also survey their employment a year after graduation to discover if they have continued in ministry. For graduates to be offered larger church opportunities after graduation is not unusual, so this survey is a better gauge of their full-time employment after graduation. Of course, sometimes graduates find that they are not suited for ministry, so they go into a different vocation.

Having examined the employment patterns of recent graduates, we set the threshold for students at graduation serving in a full-time or part-time paid position at graduation at 40% and those serving in some type of ministry position at 70%. A year after graduation, our threshold for student employment is 50% of students serving in a paid positions and 80% of students serving in some ministry position.

Results of Student Success in Paid Employment in Ministry at Graduation

Semester	Paid Full-time or Part-time Ministry at Graduation	Threshold	+/- thresh	Goal	Volunteer Ministry at Graduation	Total Serving in Ministry	Threshold	+/- Thresh	Goal
Spring 2016	62%	40%	+22%	50%	26%	88%	70%	+18%	80%
Fall 2016	60%		+20%		23%	83%		+13%	
Spring 2017	42%		+2%		39%	81%		+11%	
Fall 2017	50%		+10%		33%	83%		+13%	
Spring 2018	77%		+37%		11%	88%		+18%	
Fall 2018	67%		+27%		18%	85%		+15%	
Spring 2019	56%		+16%		27%	83%		+13%	
Fall 2019	65%		+15%		26%	91%		+21%	
Spring 2020	61%		+21%		25%	86%		+16%	
Average	60%		+20%		25%	85%		+15%	

**Data is drawn from a Graduating Student Questionnaire taken at each graduation.*

Employment and church service of our graduates is comparatively high. In the last five years of graduation classes, about 60% of the graduates were already serving in a full-time or part-time ministry position, and over 85% were serving in some church leadership role. Based on this track record, the thresholds have been determined to be at least 40% serving in a paid (part-time or full-time) ministry position and at least 70% serving in some ministry position, as noted in the above chart. NOBTS also monitors two other figures regarding employment of students who earned graduate and doctoral degrees. The first is the employment of graduate alumni one-year post graduation, which is drawn from a report to ATS each year; the second is employment by PhD graduates, as tracked by our Research Doctoral Degrees office.

**Results of Student Success in Paid Employment in Ministry
among Recent Graduate Program Alumni***

Year/Degree Graduated	Paid Full-Time Ministry Employment	Paid Part-Time Ministry Employment	Total Ministry Employment	Pursuing an Advanced Degree	Seeking Employment	No Longer in Ministry
2014-15 master's degree alumni	56.5%	14.5%	71%	12%	6%	1%
2014-15 doctoral degree alumni	80%	4%	84%	0%	0%	1%
2015-16 master's degree alumni	55%	12%	67%	8%	9%	2%
2015-16 doctoral degree alumni	90%	7%	97%	0%	0%	0%
2016-17 master's degree alumni	53%	16%	69%	10%	6%	4%
2016-17 doctoral degree alumni	77%	9%	86%	0%	5%	2%
2018-19 master's degree alumni	59%	13%	72%	10%	5%	3%
2018-19 doctoral degree alumni	73%	15%	88%	0%	4%	0%
2019-20 master's degree alumni	55%	11%	66%	14%	9%	3%
2019-20 doctoral degree alumni	78%	13%	91%	0%	9%	0%

**Data is drawn from a report to ATS about our alumni each year.*

More than one year after graduation a year ago, about 66% of master's degree alumni and 91% of doctoral graduates are serving in full-time or part-time ministry positions. Just 9% of master's degree graduates and 9% of doctoral graduates are still seeking employment.

Employment of PhD Graduates from 2005 to 2020*

PhD Graduates Responding to Survey	Serving in an Academic Position	Serving in a Ministry Position	Other	Percent Employed	Threshold	+/- Threshold	Goal
207	82 (39.6%)	118 (57%)	7 (3.4)	99%	80%	+19%	90%

**This chart represents a longitudinal study of PhD program graduates over 14 years, from 2005 – 2020.*

Because the PhD cohorts are small, a longitudinal survey provides a better picture of post-graduation employment of our PhD graduates. Among PhD graduates from 2005-2020, 99% are employed, nearly 97% of them in an academic or ministry position.

Student Success in Licensure Track Counseling Students and Graduates

Rationale for Student Success in Counseling Licensure from the NOBTS and Leavell

College Mission Statement – In keeping with the NOBTS and Leavell College Mission Statement “to prepare servants to walk with Christ, proclaim His truth, and fulfill His mission,” we desire our counseling graduates to be well-equipped and effective. Therefore, since licensure is required for many ministry positions, we desire a high “pass” rate on licensure tests, i.e. above the regional or national average.

Rationale for Criteria/Threshold for Student Success in Licensure – NOBTS licensure track counseling students take the CPCE (Counseling Preparation Comprehensive Examination), which is preparatory for licensing tests. One baseline that was considered in establishing the threshold for success was that the national mean was 85.6% in 2017, 87.7% in 2018, and 84.66% in 2019, which is required for a “pass.” The threshold was proposed by the Institutional Effectiveness staff in consultation with the counseling department and approved by the Assessment Oversight Committee and the President’s Cabinet. In keeping with the NOBTS mission statement to fulfill Christ’s mission (including a love for others), NOBTS seeks the threshold of our students to average scoring in the 90th percentile of those passing, since those counseling programs are intended to lead to licensure.

The NCE (National Counselor’s Exam) is required for LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor) licensure. The national passing score rate has never been over 65% correct answers, and 90% of the persons who take the NCE each year achieve a passing score. In keeping with the NOBTS mission statement to prepare servant leaders to fulfill Christ’s mission (including a

love for others), the threshold sought by NOBTS is 95% of graduates passing the NCE, since these counseling programs are designed to lead to licensure.

Results of NOBTS Student Success in Counseling Licensure

2017 Counseling Graduates

	NOBTS Pass Rate	NOBTS Grad Pass Threshold	NOBTS Students above the Threshold	NOBTS Students Scoring above the National Mean
CPCE*	100%	90%	+10%	77%
CPCE**	100%	95%	+5%	N/A

2018 Counseling Graduates

	NOBTS Pass Rate	NOBTS Grad Pass Threshold	NOBTS Students above the Threshold	NOBTS Students Scoring above the National Mean
CPCE*	100%	90%	+10%	77%
CPCE**	100%	95%	+5%	N/A

2019 Counseling Graduates

	NOBTS Pass Rate	NOBTS Grad Pass Threshold	NOBTS Students above the Threshold	NOBTS Students Scoring above the National Mean
CPCE*	94%	90%	+4%	71%
CPCE**	100%	95%	+5%	N/A

2020 Counseling Graduates

	NOBTS Pass Rate	NOBTS Grad Pass Threshold	NOBTS Students above the Threshold	NOBTS Students Scoring above the National Mean
CPCE*	100%	90%	+10%	77%
CPCE**	N/A	95%	N/A	N/A

**To predict our licensure pass rate, we use the results of the comprehensive exam, the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Exam (CPCE®), a comprehensive multiple-choice examination that covers the eight core CACREP areas. Students must pass the CPCE prior to graduation. Passing is calculated as 1 Standard Deviation above or below the national mean.*

***The NCE is the National Counselor Examination, which is required nationwide for Professional Counselor licensure. NCE passage rates are self-reported in an annual counseling graduate survey. Percentages represent voluntary respondents and those who had taken the exam at the time of the survey.*

Among 2019-2020 NOBTS licensure-track counseling students, 100% of the students nearing graduation passed the CPCE exam their senior year, surpassing the national mean by 18% and the NOBTS threshold by 10%. Each year the counseling faculty does an assessment after the tests are completed to discover and select at least one area for “focus in learning” in order to improve scores. Beginning with the 2019-2020 academic year, the counseling department no longer reports the NOBTS passing rate for the NCE as students take the test after graduation. Any data would be self-reported in alumni surveys and would not provide accurate data of passing rates. Additionally, CACREP, national accreditors for counseling programs, requires only CPCE passing rates as a predictor of student success on the NCE.