

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-state-board-meeting-20160506-story.html>

Chicago State University graduation rate drops to 11 percent



Chicago State University President Thomas Calhoun Jr. speaks during a board meeting May 6, 2016. Board member James Joyce is at right.

(Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

[Jodi S. Cohen](#) and [Lolly Bowean](#)[Contact Reporters](#)Chicago Tribune

Already reeling from a financial crisis and mass layoffs, Chicago State University acknowledged Friday that its graduation rate had dropped to 11 percent.

The public university, which has long been criticized for its strikingly low graduation rate, could now face increased scrutiny from lawmakers and accreditors. In recent years, the graduation rate ranged from 13 to 21 percent.

"There are so many different factors that impact graduation rates," new Chicago State President Thomas Calhoun Jr. said after a five-hour board meeting at the Far South Side campus, which

serves about 4,500 mostly low-income and minority students. "Chicago State has to analyze our data and look for the factors so that we can be aware of what's contributing."

The graduation numbers show that of the 589 full time freshmen who started in 2009, only 11 percent — or about 65 students — graduated six years later in 2015. This year's figures have not yet been calculated, officials said.

School officials attributed some of the decline to CSU dismissing nearly 300 undergraduates in 2011 after discovering that, in violation of school policy, they had been allowed to continue to enroll despite failing GPAs. A previous Tribune story said that the group included 47 students from the 2009 freshman class.



[Chicago State lays off a third of its staff; Rev. Jackson blasts Rauner](#)

"The 11 percent graduation rate is a result of the students dropped in spring 2011 for poor academic performance as previously reported by the Chicago Tribune," Sabrina Land, director of marketing and communications, said in a statement. "This decision was made to preserve the academic integrity of the university."

Still, the low graduation rate cannot be fully attributed to dismissing those students — many of whom likely were not on track to graduate within six years anyway. As the Tribune previously reported, the 2009 freshman class got off to a troubling start. Of the 589 students who started, about 61 percent were enrolled a year later. And they had earned on average only 20.1 credits during their first year. Research has shown that students who earn fewer than 24 credits in their first year of college are less likely to get a degree.

Chicago State has long argued that it's unfair to judge it on the graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen since that national standard fails to include the many students who transfer into the institution later in their studies — or leave and graduate from other institutions.

The university's six-year graduation rate for transfer students was 49 percent in 2015.

"The uniqueness of Chicago State University is that it primarily serves transfer students," Land said.

The six-year graduation rate is the universal standard, and is used by the U.S. Department of Education. It includes only first-time, full-time freshmen. Nationally, about 59 percent of students obtain a bachelor's degree within six years.

The university's graduation rates have been cause for concern in the past.

In 2009, Chicago State's accreditation agency, the Higher Learning Commission, cited "grave" concerns with the school, including the university's "remarkably poor" graduation and retention rates. The accreditation was reaffirmed and the university's previous president, Wayne Watson, touted increased retention and graduation rates as evidence that the institution was on the upswing. Watson stepped down in December after six years in the job.

Elaine Allensworth, director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, called the graduation rate "exceptionally low."

"The chances are stacked against (students) that they are going to graduate," said Allensworth, who studies student success, particularly for Chicago Public Schools students.

"For a lot of students in Chicago, Chicago State is an institution that they can get into despite low qualifications or because it is convenient for them for a number of reasons," including being close to home and having relatively low tuition, she said.



She advised students who go there "to put in a lot of effort — more than the other students because most are not going to graduate. Seek whatever academic help you can get if you are falling behind. Make sure you are going to class every day and getting the work done," she said.

Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group focused on academic achievement, said Chicago State's graduation rate is lower than that of its peer institutions.

"It is quite clear that they serve students who are on average poor and have more challenges than at the average college in America," Haycock said. "But when you look at institutions that serve similar students ... most of them get better results."

Chicago State trustees and administrators did not publicly discuss the graduation figures at the Friday board meeting.

The data comes at an already difficult time for the university.

Chicago State and other Illinois schools went nearly the entire academic year without state money as lawmakers were unable to agree on a budget. In April, lawmakers approved \$20.1 million in emergency funding for Chicago State, part of a larger funding package for public universities, but it was less than 60 percent of what the university had expected to receive this fiscal year.

It proved to be too little, too late, for a school that relies heavily on state funding. About 300 administrators and staff lost their jobs, Calhoun said. Faculty positions may be eliminated as well.

The university declared a financial emergency earlier this year and moved up graduation by two weeks to ensure classes would end before money ran out.

Calhoun Jr. emphasized Friday that the university has to find other funding streams if it wants to thrive, leaning more on alumni donations as state funding is unpredictable.

"We do not deserve, nor can we tolerate, being simply in survival mode," Calhoun told the board during his report.

"The reality is we're in the second decade of a consistent decline in state funding for public higher education," he said. "This is a national trend."



[As Chicago State ends semester early and some funds OK'd, uncertainty looms](#)

The university has started a telethon to solicit donations from its more than 40,000 alumni, Calhoun said, and is making plans to expand outreach to let the public know about the school's needs.

The university also must work harder to boast about its success stories, Calhoun said. Many in the public don't know that the school has a unique cyber security program or that it produces a high number of African-American physics majors.

Calhoun pushed the audience to think hard about how they can generate money and recruit students for the school.

"Think: What can I do to make our university become more sound?" he said.

[*lbowean@tribpub.com*](mailto:lbowean@tribpub.com)

[*jscohen@tribpub.com*](mailto:jscohen@tribpub.com)