

## Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a bold national effort to help more community college students succeed, with a special focus on students of color and low-income students. The initiative proceeds from the premise that success begets success, using a student-centered model of institutional improvement to create a culture of evidence in which data and inquiry drive broad-based institutional efforts to close achievement gaps and improve student outcomes overall.

## Outcomes of First-Year Persisting Students

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) survey,<sup>1</sup> 62 percent of first-time community college students persisted through their first year at their initial institution, while 23 percent left without returning over the following three years. Research has shown that a variety of factors are associated with persistence, particularly during a student's first academic year: the student's social and cultural capital,<sup>2</sup> direct entry upon high school graduation, developmental education needs, parents' highest level of education, socioeconomic status, and number of institutions attended.<sup>3</sup>

Previous issues of *Data Notes*<sup>4</sup> have examined the characteristics of students who stop out<sup>5</sup> of college late in their academic careers, and found that these stop-outs are related to developmental education referral, Pell grant receipt, gender (being male), and being enrolled with undeclared or terminal majors. In this issue, second- and third-year enrollment outcomes of first-year persisting students (FYP) were examined to determine which student characteristics are associated with higher rates of persistence and award attainment.

For the purposes of this analysis, FYPs are defined as those continuously enrolled for all terms during the first academic year, excluding summer sessions. FYPs' three-year enrollment and attainment outcomes were analyzed and disaggregated by persistence and by completion/transfer status.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, students were grouped based on the interaction of several student characteristics; analysis was conducted to determine if differences in outcomes existed between students when they were grouped based on this interaction of characteristics.

## Outcomes by Student Characteristics

The fact that a student persists and completes his or her first academic year does not necessarily lead to future academic success. Consistent with the BPS survey, second-year persistence rates for FYPs were relatively high, with close to two-thirds (64 percent) of students at Achieving the Dream colleges persisting to the fall term of their second year; when students who enrolled anytime during the second year were included, persistence rates increased to 69 percent (Figure 1, see page 2). However, only 43 percent were still enrolled during their third academic year. An additional 18 percent of FYPs completed credentials by the end of year three, and 9 percent transferred, for a total of 69 percent of FYPs who persisted, completed or transferred in year three.

“FYPs who started college full-time had second-year persistence rates of 72 percent, compared with 66 percent for those starting part-time.”

Some student and enrollment characteristics were associated with higher rates of success. FYPs who started college full-time had second-year persistence rates of 72 percent, compared with 66 percent for those starting part-time. The gap continued in the third year, but closed in absolute difference to 44 percent for those starting full-time and 41 percent for those starting part-time. The achievement gap between full- and part-time students was also seen when examining three-year credential completion and transfer rates: 30 percent of those who started full-time completed or transferred within three years, compared with 21 percent of those who started part-time. Some of these students may have transferred from other colleges, but students

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, First Follow-up (BPS:04/06). Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/das>.

<sup>2</sup> Social and cultural capital are sociological terms articulated by Pierre Bourdieu that represent the skills, knowledge, education, and experiences a person has which give them a higher status in society—or, in terms of college enrollment, help them navigate the system and persist and/or attain an award.

<sup>3</sup> Adelman, C. *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Topper, A. “Late Stop-Outs.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol.4, No.5, September/October 2009; Topper, A. “Late Stop-Outs, Part 2.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol.4, No.6, November/December 2009.

<sup>5</sup> A “stop-out” is defined as a student who withdraws temporarily from enrollment at a college or university. Students categorized as stop-outs may re-enroll at a later date.

<sup>6</sup> Baseline cohort for all Rounds 1 through 4 and the 2009 Cohort (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; 2004 for Round 4; 2006 for 2009 Cohort).



## What Is a Cohort?

A cohort is a group of people studied during a period of time. The individuals in the group have at least one statistical factor—such as when they started college—in common.

The Achieving the Dream 2002 student cohort, for example, is the group of credential-seeking students that attended Achieving the Dream institutions for the first time in fall 2002.

Tracking a cohort makes it possible to compare progress and outcomes of different groups of students (e.g., groups defined by race, age or other demographic characteristics) and to determine if there are gaps in achievement among groups of interest.

Figure 1. Three-year outcomes of first-year persisters by enrollment status, developmental education referral, and major type

	Number in initial cohort	Percentage persisted to Fall, 2nd year	Percentage persisted to any term, 2nd year	Percentage persisted to any term, 3rd year	Percentage transferred by 3rd year	Percentage transferred by 3rd year
<b>Total, all students</b>	<b>141,779</b>	<b>63.5</b>	<b>69.3</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>8.7</b>
<b>Enrollment Status</b>						
Part-time	56,997	59.0	65.6	41.0	14.6	6.3
Full-time	84,782	66.5	71.9	44.1	19.6	10.2
<b>Developmental Education Referral</b>						
Yes	94,379	64.3	70.1	44.2	16.5	7.1
No	47,400	61.8	67.7	40.2	19.8	11.6
<b>Major Type</b>						
Transfer	77,714	64.5	70.6	45.6	12.5	10.8
Terminal	48,320	62.5	68.0	40.3	23.5	6.6
Undeclared	15,745	61.4	67.1	37.1	24.6	4.5
<b>Pell Grant Receipt</b>						
Yes	50,019	61.7	67.3	41.1	18.4	6.0
No	91,760	64.5	70.4	43.8	17.2	10.1

Note: The first, baseline cohort at each Achieving the Dream college was included in this analysis (2003 Cohort for Rounds 1 and 2; 2004 Cohort for Round 3; 2005 Cohort for Round 4; 2006 Cohort for 2009 Colleges).

do not always provide this information to their current colleges. Further, colleges do not always have information regarding the academic goals of students enrolling with no stated degree or transfer goal. This information would improve the ability of colleges to better understand attainment and successful outcomes.

*“FYPs initially enrolled in transfer majors had consistently higher second and third year persistence rates than did students initially enrolled in terminal or undeclared majors.”*

Consistent with earlier *Data Notes* findings<sup>7</sup>, FYPs initially referred to developmental education were more likely to persist into the second term and second year<sup>8</sup> than were FYPs not referred to developmental education; by the third year, persistence rates were the same for both groups. Three-year completion and transfer rates, however, were lower for students referred to developmental education. Previous analysis of developmental education student outcomes showed that students at Achieving the Dream colleges who were referred to developmental

education were more likely to enroll part-time, complete fewer of the credits they attempted, and have lower cumulative grade point averages than were non-referred students. Thus, developmental education students may take longer to complete credentials because they receive limited or no credit for their developmental courses, and they may face greater challenges in succeeding in their college-level coursework.

FYPs initially enrolled in transfer majors had consistently higher second and third year persistence rates than did students initially enrolled in terminal or undeclared majors. However, students beginning as transfer majors were less likely to either obtain credentials or transfer at the end of three years compared with students in terminal or undeclared majors. Thirty percent of the students in terminal majors and 29 percent of the undeclared students had successful outcomes, compared with 23 percent of students in transfer majors. Students who transfer<sup>9</sup> before earning a credential are considered a success; this is most evident for students enrolled in transfer majors.<sup>10,11</sup>

Contrary to previous analysis<sup>12</sup>, persistence rates for FYP Pell grant recipients were lower than were those of non-recipients. Sixty-two percent

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<sup>7</sup> Topper, A. “Outcome Differences by Developmental Status and Gender.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol.3, No.6, November/December 2008; Clery, S. and A. Topper. “Developmental Education: Completion Status and Outcomes.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol.3, No.4, July/August 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Seventy-two percent of students referred to developmental education persisted into the second term compared with 65 percent of non-referred students; 59 percent of referred students persisted into the second year, compared with 55 percent of non-referred students.

<sup>9</sup> The Achieving the Dream initiative collects data on student transfers, but does not differentiate between a two-year or a four-year transfer.

<sup>10</sup> Townsend, B. “Redefining the Community College Transfer Mission.” *Community College Review*, Fall 2001, Vol. 29, Issue 2.

<sup>11</sup> Townsend, B. “Transfer Rates: A Problematic Criterion for Measuring the Community College.” *New Directions in Community Colleges*, Spring 2002, n117, p13–24.

<sup>12</sup> Clery, S. “Do Pell Grants Make a Difference.” *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol.1, No.4, May 2006.

of FYPs who received Pell grants reenrolled during the fall of the second year, compared with 65 percent of FYP non-recipients. The difference in persistence rates remained relatively unchanged through the end of the third year, with Pell grant recipients slightly less likely to continue enrollment compared with non-recipients. Successful completions reflected the lower persistence rates of Pell Grant recipients. Twenty-four percent of the Pell Grant recipients had a successful outcome, compared with 27 percent of those who did not receive a Pell Grant.

## Interactions of Student Characteristics

To determine the cumulative effect of various student characteristics on student outcomes, data reflecting FYPs were first disaggregated by enrollment status, followed by developmental education referral, major field, and then Pell grant receipt. Disaggregating the data to this level provides a more detailed overview of how these student attributes might interact, and how they relate to student persistence. This drill-down analysis also provides a practical example of how student data—particularly for groups of students that may be unidentified in a more general analysis—can be used to inform policy or practice.

As shown in Figure 1, students who started college part-time had lower second- and third-year persistence rates than did full-time students. The data also show that students referred to developmental education had higher persistence rates, but lower completion and transfer rates, than did those not referred to developmental education. Figure 2 (see page 4) cross-tabulates these characteristics, which allows for examination of a more refined set of interactions among Pell grant and attendance status, major field, and referral to developmental education, as they relate to persistence, completion, and transfer rates. First, part-time Pell grant recipients referred to developmental education had lower persistence rates in both the second and third years compared with non-recipients, regardless of their major field. Interestingly, the reverse was true for part-time students not referred to developmental education, where persistence rates showed either no significant difference regardless of Pell grant status, or an advantage for recipients in the second or third years. The three-year success rate for both referred and non-referred part-time students indicates an advantage in most cases for Pell grant recipients. Part-time students enrolled in terminal or undeclared majors had higher success rates than did those in transfer-seeking majors, regardless of whether they had been referred to developmental education.

These results could be influenced by two factors. First, “part-time” includes different enrollment intensities: Pell grant recipients enrolled part-time have to be enrolled at least half time to remain eligible for the grant, and non-recipients may take lighter courseloads, which could

explain the difference. Second, persistence rates do not necessarily predict successful outcomes: Persistence is a necessary, but not sufficient, predictor of successful student outcomes. Thus, in addition to persistence, what other factors may explain success?

“*Part-time students enrolled in terminal or undeclared majors had higher success rates than did those in transfer-seeking majors, regardless of whether they had been referred to developmental education.*”

Students who started full-time, were referred to developmental education, and did not receive Pell grants had second-year persistence advantages over Pell Grant recipients, regardless of their major field. The differences between Pell and non-Pell grant recipients were not as evident for full-time students not referred to developmental education. It appears that the combination of having to deal with developmental education and the low-income status implied by Pell grant receipt may be more difficult than having to cope with only one of these factors.

Again, the percentages of students who started full-time and completed credentials or transferred were mixed. The smallest percentage of completions and transfers was for Pell grant recipients referred to developmental education who were enrolled in transfer-seeking majors, who represented 38 percent of all full-time students. Although representing only 10 percent of all full-time students, the largest percentage of completions and transfers was for full-time students in terminal majors who did not receive Pell grants and were not referred to developmental education. The latter group was more than twice as likely to complete successfully as was the former, who have more characteristics associated with higher risks of dropping or stopping out.

## What Does This Mean?

Seven out of every ten Achieving the Dream students persist into their second year. Disaggregating the data to examine detailed student groups can provide your college with a more nuanced understanding of the intermingling of several characteristics and how they are related to student success.

These data tell a complicated story. Each group of students, as defined by the receipt of Pell grants, starting college either full- or part-time, whether they were referred to developmental education, and their initial major fields, shows a different progression in their college work.

Generally, early persistence does not necessarily point to eventual credential completion or transfer. Efforts to help students succeed should

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**Figure 2.** Cross-tabulated three-year outcomes of first-year persistors by enrollment status, developmental education referral, major type, and Pell grant receipt

	Number in initial cohort	Percentage persisted to fall, 2nd year	Percentage persisted to any term, 2nd year	Percentage persisted to any term, 3rd year	Percentage transferred by 3rd year	Percentage transferred by 3rd year
<b>Total, all students</b>	<b>141,779</b>	<b>63.5</b>	<b>69.3</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>8.7</b>
PART-TIME						
<i>Referred</i>						
<i>Transfer</i>						
Received Pell	6,909	59.0	65.3	42.8	8.4	4.9
Did not receive Pell	13,100	63.0	69.9	47.8	7.5	6.9
<i>Terminal</i>						
Received Pell	5,287	57.0	63.3	36.7	21.6	4.0
Did not receive Pell	8,306	62.7	68.7	43.7	17.2	4.4
<i>Undeclared</i>						
Received Pell	1,435	58.7	64.5	26.0	43.3	3.1
Did not receive Pell	2,651	60.4	66.7	37.7	22.3	4.3
<i>Not referred</i>						
<i>Transfer</i>						
Received Pell	1,895	58.6	65.1	42.5	11.6	9.7
Did not receive Pell	6,950	53.7	61.4	37.7	10.5	11.0
<i>Terminal</i>						
Received Pell	1,457	56.7	63.1	35.1	24.6	6.9
Did not receive Pell	5,669	57.2	63.2	36.5	21.3	6.3
<i>Undeclared</i>						
Received Pell	424	66.0	71.2	45.3	25.0	2.6
Did not receive Pell	2,914	50.2	56.5	34.2	12.1	6.1
FULL-TIME						
<i>Referred</i>						
<i>Transfer</i>						
Received Pell	13,188	64.7	70.2	46.4	11.6	6.4
Did not receive Pell	18,961	69.8	75.4	49.5	13.2	13.3
<i>Terminal</i>						
Received Pell	9,126	60.2	65.9	38.6	23.3	4.2
Did not receive Pell	9,994	69.1	73.8	44.9	25.5	8.3
<i>Undeclared</i>						
Received Pell	3,000	61.5	66.1	32.7	32.7	2.2
Did not receive Pell	2,422	68.4	74.1	41.7	24.4	4.9
<i>Not referred</i>						
<i>Transfer</i>						
Received Pell	4,572	67.0	71.8	45.2	16.7	12.4
Did not receive Pell	12,139	66.8	73.0	43.2	19.7	18.6
<i>Terminal</i>						
Received Pell	2,522	62.5	67.4	37.2	29.2	9.1
Did not receive Pell	5,959	66.2	70.8	39.8	30.7	11.8
<i>Undeclared</i>						
Received Pell	782	69.9	73.9	42.6	29.0	3.3
Did not receive Pell	2,117	66.1	71.9	42.5	21.7	6.7

Note: The first, baseline cohort at each Achieving the Dream college was included in this analysis (2003 Cohort for Rounds 1 and 2; 2004 Cohort for Round 3; 2005 Cohort for Round 4; 2006 Cohort for 2009 Colleges).

be calibrated to address the very particular needs of students with different characteristics, goals, and enrollment status. Most importantly, efforts to help students succeed need to be continuous throughout their enrollment.

Additional questions for investigation include:

- If a student completes his/her first year, what are the chances that he/she will persist to credential completion or transfer?
- What is the relationship between persistence patterns and timely graduation or transfer?

- Do meaningful differences exist among student sub-groups in their chances of graduating or transferring?
- What programs do we have, or can we implement, to help students with multiple barriers to success to transfer or complete credentials after completing their first academic year?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college's data, at [www.dreamwebsubmission.org](http://www.dreamwebsubmission.org). ■

*Data Notes* is a bimonthly publication that examines data to illuminate the challenges facing Achieving the Dream colleges and to chart their progress over time.

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If you have questions regarding this issue, or if there is a topic you would like to see addressed in *Data Notes*, please contact Sue Clery at [sclery@jblassoc.com](mailto:sclery@jblassoc.com).

Note: This issue of *Data Notes* uses the March 2010 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are grouped by the year they started work with the initiative.

*Data may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.*