

## 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.

## Returning Students

Multi-institutional attendance, often referred to as “swirling,” is a common occurrence among students who attend community colleges.<sup>1</sup> Forty-seven percent of students who started their postsecondary education at community colleges in 1995–1996 attended more than one institution by 2001, with 12 percent attending three or more schools.<sup>2</sup> A variety of factors can cause students to move between institutions on their way to completion, including:

- Transfer
- Relocation
- Changing major field/program of study
- Concurrent enrollment
- Continuing education
- Enrollment in special programs<sup>3</sup>

While numerous studies have examined multi-institutional attendance patterns, little attention has been directed to students who return to their original institutions after completing credentials or transferring to another institution. Because some students return to the community college after transfer, it makes transfer as a community college outcome difficult to interpret. How should institutions count these students in an accountability system? If a student transfers and returns, should the original transfer count as a successful outcome?

This issue of *Data Notes* looks at students who returned to their original Achieving the Dream institution after completing credentials or transferring to another institution. This analysis provides information on return rates, and on attendance status and number of terms attended when students return to their original campus. In addition, the results track the outcomes of these returning students in terms of degree completion or second transfer.

Students from Round 1 and Round 2 Achieving the Dream colleges, who began at those colleges in the Fall term of 2002 or 2003 and who completed or transferred within three years, were analyzed to determine whether they returned to their original institution within six years after initial enrollment. The results are arrayed by whether they received either a certificate or associate degree, or whether they transferred again. For students who returned after completing a credential, the results are further disaggregated by whether they had completed a terminal program or a transfer program.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that 93 percent of the students who completed certificates were in terminal programs, while 60 percent of associate degree recipients were in transfer programs. Therefore, outcomes for certificate recipients are weighted heavily by the terminal-major students, while the associate degree awardees' outcomes are weighted heavily by transfer-major students.

## Rate of Return

Figure 1 shows that 42 percent of students who either received a degree or certificate or transferred from an Achieving the Dream college within three years of initial enrollment returned

“83 percent of initial certificate holders who were in transfer majors returned...”

within six years of initial enrollment. Fifty-seven percent of certificate recipients returned within six years of first enrollment, compared with 39 percent of those who received associate's degrees and 38 percent of those who had transferred.

Noteworthy here is the fact that 83 percent of initial certificate holders who were in transfer

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Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

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<sup>1</sup> The term “swirling” was first used by De los Santos and Wright to describe multi-institutional attendance patterns. See De los Santos, A., Jr., and I. Wright. *Maricopa's Swirling Students: Earning One-Third of Arizona State's Bachelor's Degrees*. Community, Technical, and Junior College Journal, Vol. 60, No. 6, 1990, pp. 32–34.

<sup>2</sup> Peter, K., and Forrest Cataldi, E. (2005). *The Road Less Traveled? Students Who Enroll in Multiple Institutions* (NCES 2005–157). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>3</sup> Award completion includes all certificates, associates, and advanced degrees. For a more extensive discussion of the reasons for multi-institutional attendance, see McCormick, A. C. “Swirling and Double-Dipping: New Patterns of Student Attendance and Their Implications for Higher Education,” in J.E. King, E.L. Anderson, and M.E. Corrigan, eds, *Changing Student Attendance Patterns: Challenges For Policy and Practice*, New Directions for Higher Education, No. 121, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Terminal-major fields are defined as those career/technical programs of study that prepare a student for work with no further education. Transfer fields are defined as academic programs of study that can be transferred to another institution and counted towards a bachelor's degree.

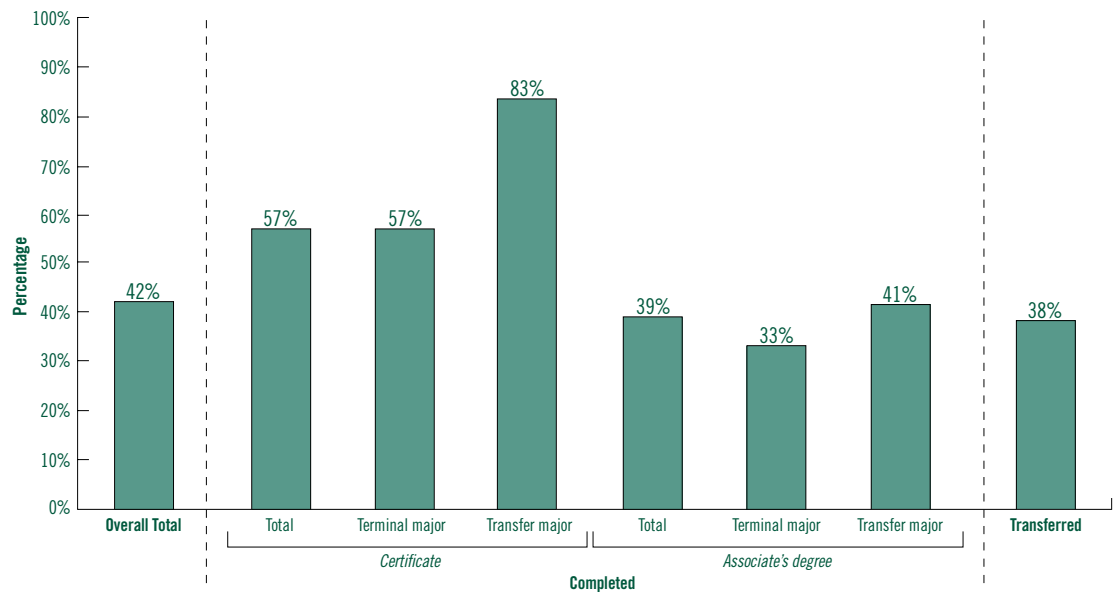
## What Is a Cohort?

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.** Percentage of Achieving the Dream 3-year completers/transfers who re-enrolled within six years after initial enrollment



Note: The first two cohorts for students at Achieving the Dream Round 1 and 2 colleges were included in this analysis.

majors returned. This is a small population, but it represents a group of students with a continuing commitment to continue their postsecondary education, and to do so at a community college.

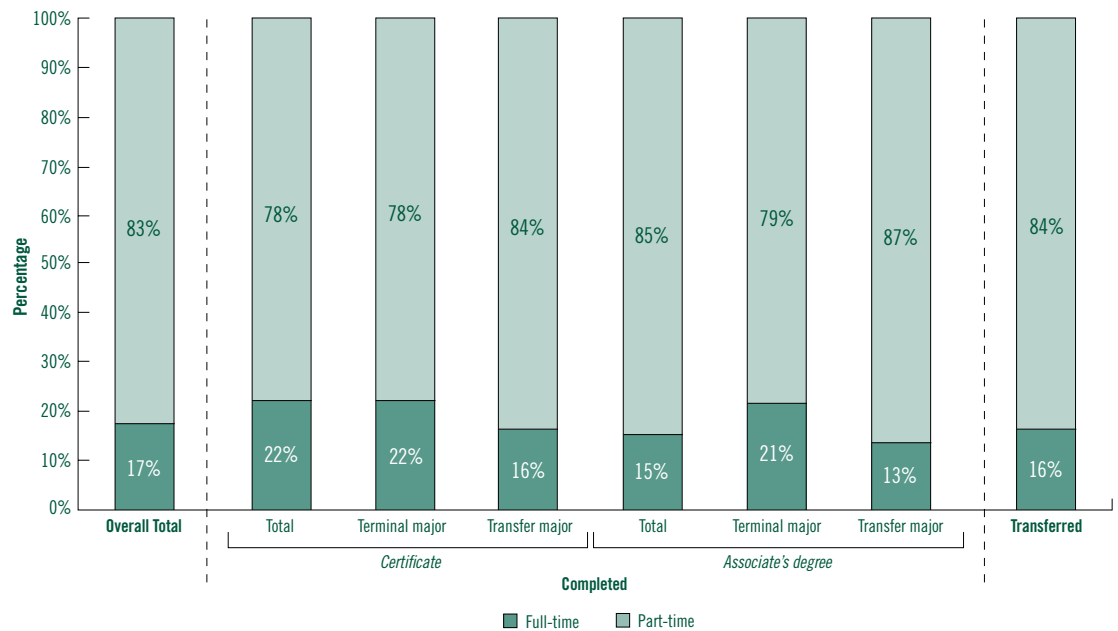
## Attendance Status

As Figure 2 displays, 83 percent of students who returned after credential completion or transfer returned on a part-time basis; 17 percent

returned full-time. Interestingly, students who received credentials in terminal fields were more likely to return on a full-time basis than were students who received credentials in transfer fields of study; this finding held for both initial certificate and associate degree holders. Students who initially transferred to another institution were also less likely to re-enroll full-time.

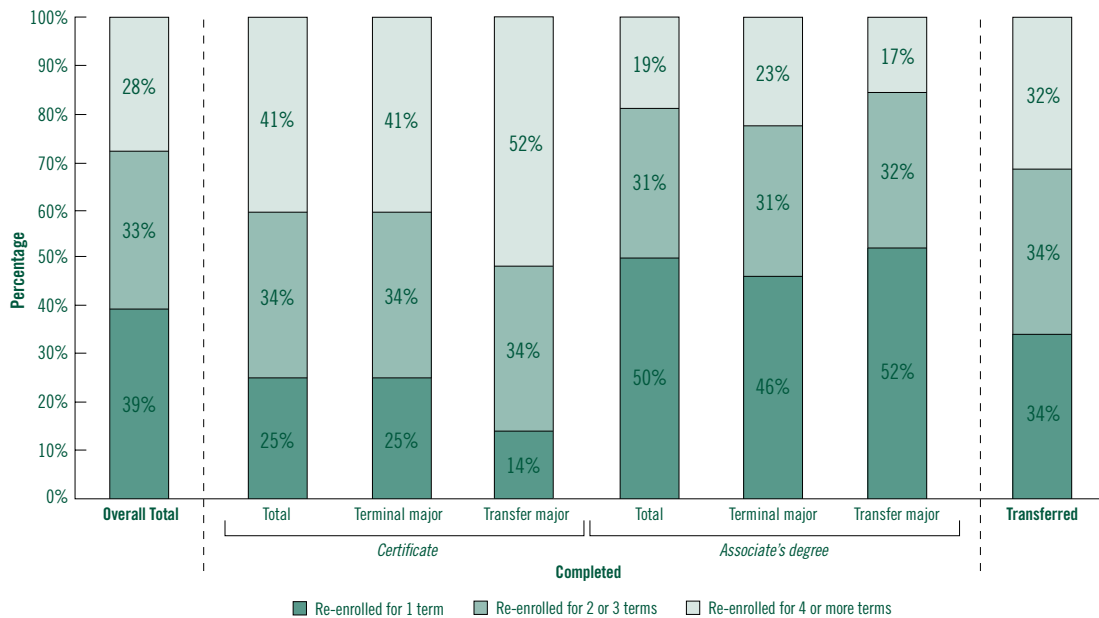
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**Figure 2.** Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream 3-year completers/transfers who re-enrolled within six years of initial enrollment, by attendance status upon re-enrollment



Notes: Full-time is defined as attempting 12 or more credits. The first two cohorts for students at Achieving the Dream Round 1 and 2 colleges were included in this analysis.

**Figure 3.** Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream 3-year completers/transfers who re-enrolled within six years of initial enrollment, by number of terms re-enrolled



Notes: Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were included. The first two cohorts for students at Achieving the Dream Round 1 and 2 colleges were included in this analysis.

### Number of Terms

Students who returned after credential completion or transfer were split into rough thirds according to the number of terms for which they returned: 39 percent of students returned to their original college for only one term, 33 percent returned for two to three terms, and 28 percent attended four or more terms (Figure 3).

More than half (52 percent) of students in transfer majors who initially attained certificates returned for four or more terms during the time period studied. This compares with 14 percent who returned for a single term. Conversely, 52 percent of associate degree recipients in transfer majors returned for only one term, compared with 17 percent who returned for four or more terms.

*“39 percent of students returned to their original college for only one term, 33 percent returned for two to three terms, and 28 percent attended four or more terms.”*

The results indicate a comparable pattern for students with terminal majors, but with smaller differences. Forty-one percent of students that attained terminal-major certificates returned for three or more terms, compared with 23 percent of students who enrolled that long after receiving an associate degree in a terminal major. The reverse was true for those returning for just one term—25 percent of students who attained certificates in terminal majors returned for one term, compared with 46 percent of those who attained associate degrees.

### Consecutive Completion/Transfer

Figure 4 displays outcomes for returning students. Overall, 29 percent of students who re-enrolled after credential completion or transfer attained second credentials, 35 percent transferred again, and 36 percent returned, but never received a second award or transferred.

The percent of completions or transfers for returning students varied widely by their initial credential levels and curriculum areas of study. Noteworthy outcomes included:

- Nearly two-thirds, 65 percent, of returning students who initially attained certificates in transfer majors persisted to complete associate degrees. This finding supports the previously stated hypothesis that the certificate award for students in transfer majors is a stepping stone to their final educational goals, and perhaps the true goal was to attain a higher degree and/or transfer to a four-year institution.
- As expected, the largest proportion of students who originally attained credentials in terminal majors and returned did not receive a second credential or transfer—regardless of credential level attained. Forty-nine percent of certificate holders and 54 percent of those who had received an associate’s degree in a terminal major did not receive another degree or transfer.
- Interestingly, however, about 30 percent of both certificate and associate’s degree recipients with credentials in career/technical majors did return to attain another associate degree.

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**Figure 4.** Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream 3-year completers/transfers who re-enrolled within six years, by consecutive completion/transfer and original credential and major field or transfer status

	No consecutive award/transfer	Consecutive degree			Consecutive transfer
		Certificate	Associate's degree	Other	
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>35</b>
ORIGINAL CREDENTIAL AND MAJOR FIELD OR TRANSFER STATUS					
Completed					
Certificate	48	17	31	1	3
Terminal major	49	16	30	1	3
Transfer major	27	5	65	0	3
Associate's degree	41	2	24	1	33
Terminal major	54	4	31	1	11
Transfer major	36	1	17	0	45
Transferred	20	1	17	0	62

Note: The first two cohorts for students at Achieving the Dream Round 1 and 2 colleges were included in this analysis.

“29 percent of students who re-enrolled after credential completion or transfer attained second credentials...”

- Forty-five percent of students who earned an associate's degree in a transfer major and then returned transferred the second time around. These could be students attempting to obtain a stronger background in a subject, or to obtain more qualified credits to transfer to a four-year institution.
- Finally, 62 percent of the students who initially transferred and then returned transferred again. This may represent students who use the community college to take an occasional class while enrolled at another institution, or students who use multiple campuses of convenience to stitch together a program. This is an example of student swirling—moving from institution to institution to obtain credits.

### What Does This Mean?

Four out of every ten students who graduated or transferred returned to their Achieving the Dream college to pursue additional coursework. Return rates varied by students' initial outcomes and major fields of study. Students who received certificates during their first three years were more likely to return to the initial college than were students with associate's degrees, or students who initially transferred. Further, both certificate and associate's degree recipients in transfer programs were more likely to return than were students in terminal-major fields of study.

Students' apparent goals differed by their initial outcomes and major fields of study. The results indicate that an initial certificate attained by a

student was a stepping stone to a higher credential or transfer compared with students who received an initial associate's degree. When disaggregated by major field, initial certificate awardees in a transfer major were more likely to return full-time and for multiple terms than students who attained certificates in terminal major fields of study. Indeed, these outcomes were realized with higher proportions of initial certificate students in transfer majors obtaining consecutive credentials. Finally, the swirling phenomenon is evidenced by the finding that the majority of initial transfer students who return, transfer again.

In general, the findings highlight the variability of institutional enrollment, and the fact that despite completing credentials or transferring to other institutions, a significant portion of Achieving the Dream students who returned to their original institution continued their coursework or earned additional credentials. Additional research is needed to more fully understand why these students return. Questions colleges may consider include:

- Who are the students that return after attaining credentials or transferring?
- Are these students returning to obtain more basic skills? Advanced degrees? Job training?
- What did these returning students do in the time between transferring or graduating and returning?
- For students who attained credentials, what fields were their credentials in? Is there a pattern?

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

This issue of *Data Notes* was written by Sue Clery, Senior Research Associate, and Amy Topper, Achieving the Dream Data Coordinator, both of JBL Associates, Inc., and edited by MDC Communications Director, Richard Hart. Newsletter production by Linda Marcetti, Asterisk & Image.

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 January 2010 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.

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