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.

Late Stop-Outs

Research has shown that credit accumulation and student persistence are related—students who complete only a few credits, particularly during their first academic year, are less likely to persist or attain credentials through the second year than are students who accumulate more credits.[1] A recent study of first-time students in Florida found that, for

> **"Some students make significant progress toward a degree within the first two academic years, but leave the institution prior to completion."**

younger students, reaching a milestone (such as accumulating 20 credits or completing half of their program of study) positively affects their chances of earning credentials.[2] Numerous studies have been conducted that describe credit accumulation during students' first academic year; however, beyond the studies cited above, there is limited research linking first-year credit accumulation to outcomes in subsequent years.

Some students make significant progress toward a degree within the first two academic years, but leave the institution prior to completion. These students may transfer to another institution, feel they have obtained sufficient skills or job training to enter the workforce, or perhaps just did not complete the paperwork necessary to receive their actual diplomas or certificates. They also could be genuine late stop-outs; such students have many possible reasons for stopping out after accumulating a significant number of credits, such as a change in family or financial situation, job change, or a geographic move.

This issue of *Data Notes* investigates the extent of this late stop-out phenomenon among

Achieving the Dream students: the percentage of students who accumulate at least 30 credits within the first two years, only to stop out without completing credentials or transferring. This analysis identified students completing 30 credits by the end of their second academic year and determined their outcomes over the next three academic years. The distribution of students who completed their credentials, transferred, persisted, or did not re-enroll at some point during the ensuing three years was disaggregated by race/ethnicity and Pell Grant receipt during the first enrollment period.[3]

Credit Accumulation

Just over one-quarter of Achieving the Dream students (27 percent) accumulated 30 or more credits by the end of their second year (Figure 1). The majority of students—69 percent—accumulated fewer credits (an average of 11) over the two years.[4,5,6] Four percent of students completed credentials or transferred by the end

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by two-year credit accumulation and outcome status
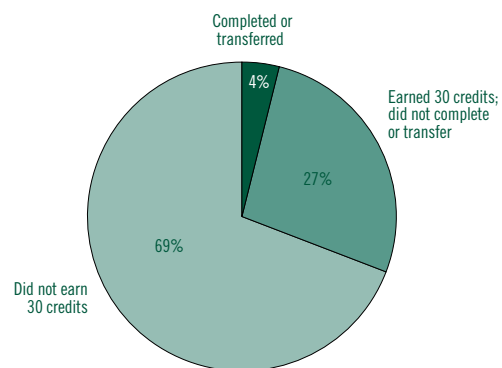
Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

(continued on next page)

---

[1] U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*, by Clifford Adelman. Washington, DC: 1999.

[2] Calcagno, J.C., Crosta, P., Bailey, T. and Jenkins, D. *Stepping Stones to a Degree: The Impact of Enrollment Pathways and Milesto nes on Community College Student Outcomes*. Research in Higher Education, Vol. 48, No. 7, November 2007, pages 775–801.

[3] Pell Grant receipt is the initiative's measure of low-income status. This analysis includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Round 1 and 2 Achieving the Dream colleges.

[4] This includes all students, regardless of attendance or persistence status during the first two academic years.

[5] Some of these students may be attending part-time, and thus have not had a chance to complete 30 credits, or may be completing developmental education requirements that do not show up in the accumulation of credential-bearing credits. Further analysis is needed to determine the characteristics of students who completed fewer than 30 credits by the end of their second year.

[6] Of the 69 percent of students who earned less than 30 credits, 4 percent earned credentials requiring less than 30 credits.

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.

of their second academic year.[7] Credit accumulation is correlated to attendance status; a previous issue of *Data Notes* showed that part-time students at Achieving the Dream colleges accumulate fewer credits and are more at risk of dropping out than are students enrolled full time.[8]

Outcomes by Credits Accumulated

Figure 2 displays outcomes in years three through five for those students accumulating 30 or more credits by the end of year two. Seventy-five percent of students who accumulated 30 or more

> *Seventy-five percent of students who accumulated 30 or more credits in their first two years were either still enrolled (59 percent), transferred (2 percent), or completed credentials (14 percent) by the end of their third year.*

credits in their first two years were either still enrolled (59 percent), transferred (2 percent), or completed credentials (14 percent) by the end of their third year. As expected, the percent-

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students who earned at least 30 credits by the end of their second academic year, by outcomes and academic year
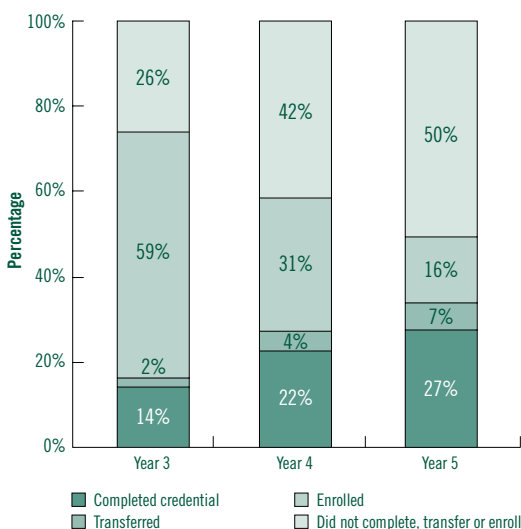
Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Rounds 1 and 2 colleges who completed 30 or more credits during their first and second academic years, but did not complete credentials or transfer during years 1 or 2.

age of students completing credentials steadily increased, to 27 percent by the end of the fifth year, and the percentage of students transferring showed an increase as well—from 2 to 7 percent.

Although the percentage of students completing credentials and transferring increased over time, re-enrollment rates decreased annually—by about a half or more each year—until only 16 percent of students re-enrolled in the fifth academic year. Years three and four saw the largest relative increase in the number of students stopping out[9]—from 26 percent to 42 percent.

Even though these students accumulated half the credits required for an associate degree during their first two academic years, 50 percent were no longer enrolled, or had not completed credentials or transferred to another institution by the end of the fifth year.

Race/Ethnicity

Figure 3 displays the percentage of students who stopped-out by race/ethnicity. Twenty-nine percent of the white, non-Hispanic and 27 percent of the Asian/Pacific Islander students who earned 30 credits by the end of year two completed credentials by the end of year five. Twenty-one percent of the Native American students earning 30 credits by the end of year two completed credentials and 4 percent transferred, which put them at the low end of successful outcomes.[10] Twenty-five percent of Hispanic students graduated and five percent transferred by the end of year five, while 24 percent of black, non-Hispanic students graduated and 8 percent transferred. Native Americans also had the highest stop-out rate (59 percent) by the fifth academic year.

Pell Grant Receipt

Although previous *Data Notes* analyses showed that Pell Grant recipients were more likely to persist over time than were non-recipients,[11] it is noteworthy that the opposite is true for students accumulating 30 credits or more by the end of their second year. The gap between the persistence rates of Pell and non-Pell grant recipients began to close by the third year, and

(continued on next page)

---

[7] Not all colleges report transfer data, so the annual percentages of students who are reported as having stopped out may be overstated. A previous issue of *Data Notes* indicated that about one-half of Achieving the Dream colleges report student transfers, with an annual transfer rate of three to five percent. The percentages reported here are for students who have been documented as transfers. (Clery, S. "Transfer Students," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2009. www.achievingthedream.org).

[8] Clery, S. and A. Topper. "Enrollment Status and Student Outcomes," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Nov/Dec 2007. www.achievingthedream.org.

[9] Students who did not re-enroll, earn a credential, or transfer.

[10] Although beyond the scope of this analysis, previous analysis of the Achieving the Dream national database has shown that most of the successful outcomes among Native American students occurred in New Mexico colleges.

[11] See: Clery, S. "Do Pell Grants Make A Difference," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 1, No. 4, May 2006. www.achievingthedream.org; Topper, A. "Achieving the Dream Students and Financial Aid," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May/June 2007. www.achievingthedream.org; and Clery, S and A. Topper. "Characteristics of Students Who Stop Out," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 4, No. 3, May/June 2009. www.achievingthedream.org.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of year five outcomes for Achieving the Dream students who earned at least 30 credits by the end of their second academic year, by race/ethnicity
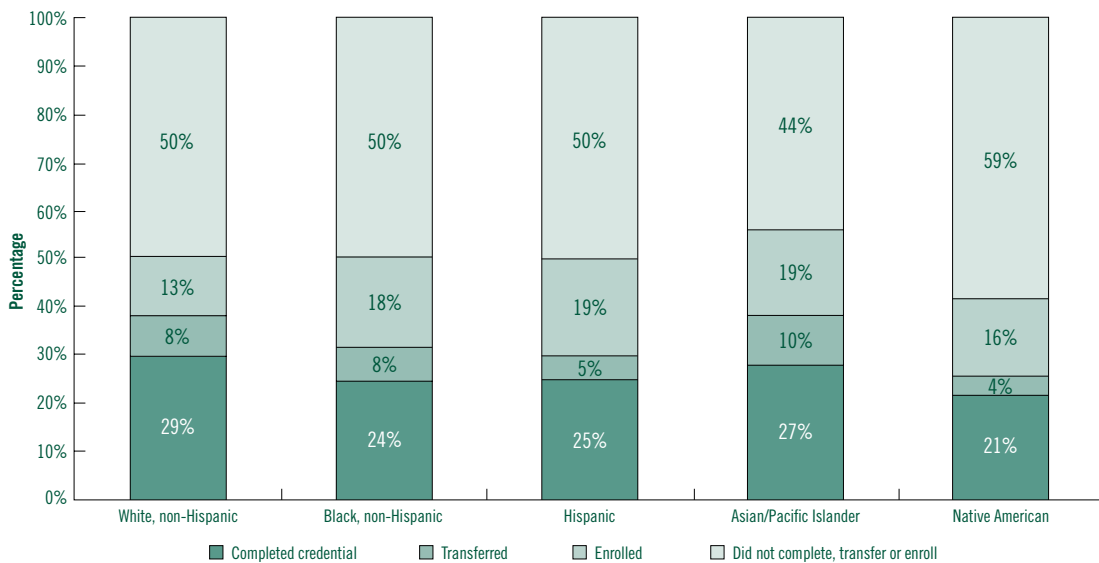
Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Rounds 1 and 2 colleges who completed 30 or more credits during their first and second academic years, but did not complete credentials or transfer during years 1 or 2.

by the end of the fifth year the initial positive relationship between Pell grant receipt and persistence begins to turn downward. As displayed in Figure 4, 49 percent of Pell grant non-recipients left by the end of year five, compared with 52 percent of Pell Grant recipients. This trend could be due to students not reapplying for Pell Grants, or to a loss of eligibility.

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of year five outcomes for Achieving the Dream students who earned at least 30 credits by the end of their second academic year, by Pell Grant status during the first term
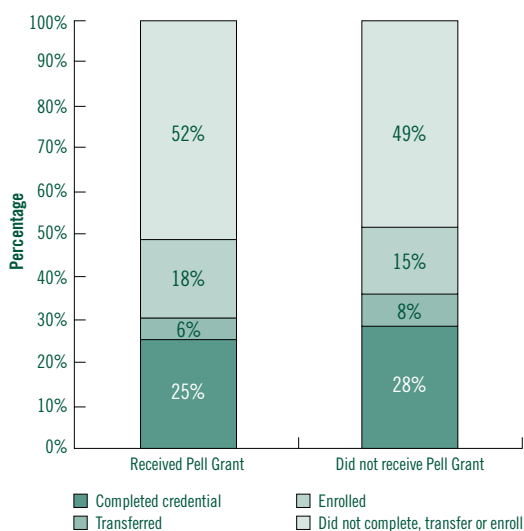
Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Rounds 1 and 2 colleges who completed 30 or more credits during their first and second academic years, but did not complete credentials or transfer during years 1 or 2.

"*Forty-nine percent of Pell grant non-recipients left by the end of year five, compared with 52 percent of Pell Grant recipients.*"

What Does it Mean?

Over two-thirds of students starting their enrollment at Achieving the Dream colleges accumulated fewer than 30 credits during their first two years of enrollment. Of those who accumulated 30 or more credits by the end of their second year, half left college without earning degrees or certificates, or transferring to another college, by the fifth year. Furthermore, Hispanic and black, non-Hispanic students who made progress during their first two years were less likely than white, non-Hispanic students to earn awards within five years. The early success of Pell Grant recipients faded away after three years of enrollment, while those who did not receive Pell Grants experienced higher rates of success.

While it is important for students to have a positive first-year experience, the results of this study suggest that colleges need to work with students *after* the first year to increase retention, transfer, or credential completion. Students who have been successful during their first two years of college may experience a different set of challenges in ensuing years as they work toward attaining their postsecondary goal—whether credential completion, transferring to a four-year institution, or persisting in their program of study.[12] While

(continued on next page)

[12]Juillerat, S. (2000). *Assessing the expectations and satisfaction levels of sophomores: How are they unique?* in Schreiner, L. A., & Pattengale, J. (Eds.). (2000). Visible solutions for invisible students: Helping sophomores succeed. (Monograph No. 31). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

developing programs to support these more seasoned students, educators should consider the ways in which these individuals differ from first-year and, often, from first-time students. Questions colleges can consider while designing programs for experienced students include:

- Do we have a large percentage of students accumulating credits over their first two years, only to leave the institution?

- Is this late stop-out phenomenon more likely to occur among certain student groups?

- Are these students merely transferring, or does it appear that they are not continuing their education at this time?

- If they are not continuing, what is the reason?

- What programs do we have in place to facilitate credential completion for these students?

- While developing programs, what do we need to consider?

- How do these more experienced students differ from students who drop out early in their academic careers with only a few credits accumulated?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college's data, at www.dreamwebsubmission.org. ∎