

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.

Academic Outcomes of High Risk Students

Many postsecondary students possess characteristics—risk factors—that are associated with decreased rates of persistence and credential completion. Delaying enrollment after high school, being financially independent, being a single parent, having dependents, working full time while enrolled, not possessing a regular high school diploma, and attending part time are among such risk factors.¹

Traditional students—those without risk factors and with greater rates of postsecondary success—are in the minority. Because many non-traditional students need to consider such things as childcare, balancing careers and full-time work with their academic schedules, and family commitments that compete for their time and finances, understanding the range of social and economic barriers to student success is imperative.

“Traditional students—those without risk factors and with greater rates of postsecondary success—are in the minority.”

Because community colleges offer relatively low-cost education and flexible schedules—options needed to allow many non-traditional students to pursue postsecondary education—this topic is especially pertinent for community colleges, where 90 percent of students have at least one risk factor, and 55 percent have three or more. Comparatively, in four-year institutions, nearly 40 percent of students do not have any risk factors, and only 25 percent have three or more.²

This issue of *Data Notes* is based on an analysis that examined Achieving the Dream data for students identified as possessing risk

factors, by intensity of risk. Students with none, one, two, and three or more risk factors were compared. Persistence, completion and transfer rates, the numbers and percentages of credits completed, and grade point averages of the various student groups were examined.³

For purposes of this analysis, the following risk factors were identified:

- Low-income: whether the student received a Pell grant during the first term
- Students of color: those who are Hispanic; black, non-Hispanic; Native American
- Referred to developmental education
- 25 years or older
- Part-time attendance during the first term

It is important to note that risk factors can be related. For example, a larger portion of older students attends part time, compared with younger students, and students of color are more likely to possess more risk factors than are white, non-Hispanic students.⁴ However, this analysis creates a consistent definition across Achieving the Dream students and provides a proxy for risk to allow comparisons between student groups.

Risk Factors and Intensity

Figure 1 displays the percentage of students possessing each of the analyzed risk factors. About one-quarter of Achieving the Dream students enrolled were 25 years or older.⁵ Although the majority of students were under the age of 25, students' need for flexible schedules is evident, as about half of Achieving the Dream students enrolled on a part-time basis during their first term. One-third of Achieving the Dream students received Pell grants during their first term of enrollment, indicating a large portion of

(continued on next page)

¹ Horn, L., & Premo, M. *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1992–93* (NCES 96-237). National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC: 1995.

² *Ibid.*

³ This analysis includes the 2002 cohort for Rounds 1 and 2; the 2003 cohort for Round 3; and the 2004 cohort for Round 4.

⁴ Hispanic, black, non-Hispanic, and Native American students are less likely to possess no risk factors than are white, non-Hispanic students (24, 20, and 19 percent, respectively, compared with 34 percent); and more likely to possess multiple risk factors—39, 51 and 46 percent of Hispanic, black, non-Hispanic, and Native American students, respectively, possessed three or more risk factors, compared with 32 percent of white, non-Hispanic students. JBL Associates' analysis of the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04), Data Analysis System (DAS), U.S. Department of Education, National Center For Education Statistics, Washington, DC.

⁵ This is similar to national rates for first-time students, where 26 percent of those who enroll are 25 or older. From an analysis of the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Data Analysis System (DAS).

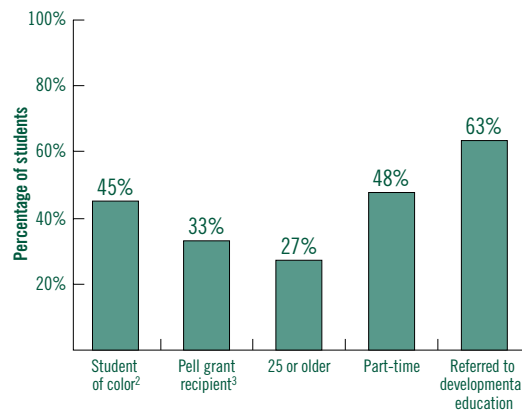
What Is a Cohort?

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 students¹ with selected risk characteristics



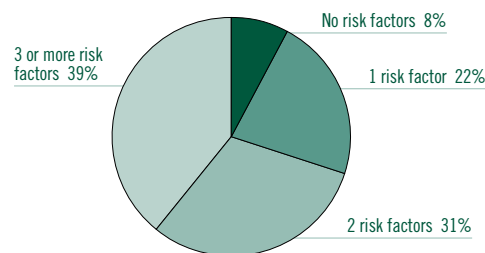
¹ Includes cohort 2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohort 2003 for Round 3; cohort 2004 for Round 4.

² Includes black, non-Hispanic, Native American, and Hispanic students.

³ Students who received Pell grants during their first term of enrollment.

students from low-income families; this finding highlights the importance of low-cost options, and the fact that financial issues may be a barrier to postsecondary success. Further, 45 percent of Achieving the Dream students were students of color, who have been shown to have lower postsecondary success rates than other student groups. Finally, nearly two-thirds, or 63 percent, of Achieving the Dream students were referred to some type of developmental education; postsecondary success rates for college students with developmental needs are lower, on average, than for those who are better academically prepared.⁶

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students¹ by number of risk factors



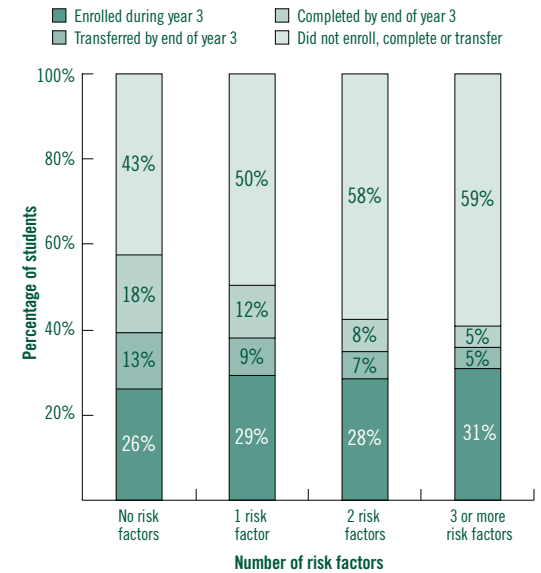
¹ Includes cohort 2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohort 2003 for Round 3; cohort 2004 for Round 4.

As displayed in Figure 2, only 8 percent of Achieving the Dream students do not possess risk factors. Slightly more than one-fifth of students, 22 percent, possess only one risk factor. Seventy percent of students possess more than one risk factor.

Persistence and Completion

Figure 3 displays the educational outcomes, after three years, for students with and without risk factors. Three-year persistence rates varied

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students¹ by number of risk factors² and education outcome at the end of year³



¹ Includes cohort 2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohort 2003 for Round 3; cohort 2004 for Round 4.

Note: Totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

slightly among students by risk factor intensity—from 26 percent for students with no risk factors, to 28 to 31 percent for those with risk factors. Noteworthy is the finding that as the number of risk factors increased, there was an upward trend in the percent of students persisting. On the other hand, completion and transfer rates were negatively correlated with the number of risk factors students possessed—the more risk factors, the lower the completion or transfer rate.

“Three-year persistence rates varied slightly among students by risk factor intensity—from 26 percent for students with no risk factors, to 28 to 31 percent for those with risk factors.”

Nearly one-third (31 percent) of students with no risk factors completed their credential or transferred within three years, compared with 10 to 21 percent of students with risk factors.

Although persistence rates generally increased with the number of risk factors, the magnitude of the difference was not large enough to offset the greater completion and transfer rates seen for students with no risk factors. The sum of persistence, completion, and transfer rates for students with no risk factors was higher than that for students with risk factors: 57 percent of students with no risk factors persisted to the third year, or completed or transferred by the end of the third

(continued on next page)

⁶ Russell, A. “Enhancing College Student Success Through Developmental Education,” *Policy Matters*. American Association of State Colleges and Universities, August, 2008. Available: <http://www.aascu.org/media/pm/pdf/pmaug08.pdf>.

year, compared with 41 to 50 percent of students with risk factors. Thus, the overall result is a positive correlation between academic risk factors and lack of academic success—the percentage of students not enrolling, completing, or transferring by the end of year three increased with the number of risk factors the students possessed.

GPA and Credit Accumulation

Grade point average (GPA) and credit accumulation were also negatively correlated with risk: The higher the number of risk factors, the lower the students' average GPAs, and numbers and percentages of credits accumulated. For students persisting through the third academic year, the average GPA for students with no risk factors was 2.54, compared with average GPAs ranging from 2.34 to 2.21 for students with one to three or more risk factors (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Grade point average and credits completed during the first three years for Achieving the Dream students¹, by number of risk factors

Number of risk factors	Cumulative GPA	Cumulative number of credits completed	Percentage of credits completed
No risk factors	2.54	37	75
1 risk factor	2.34	32	72
2 risk factors	2.34	25	70
3 or more risk factors	2.21	24	65

¹ Includes cohort 2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohort 2003 for Round 3; cohort 2004 for Round 4.

Students with risk factors who persisted to year three accumulated fewer credits than did those without risk factors. And the more risk factors students possessed, the fewer credits they accumulated. Students with three or more risk factors accumulated 24 credits by the end of year three, compared with 37 credits accumulated by students with no risk factors; students with one and two risk factors accumulated 32 and 25 credits, respectively.

By definition, students possessing risk factors were more likely to attend part time than were those with no risk factors; therefore, they had less opportunity to accumulate credits. However, one finding not dependent on attendance status is that students with no risk factors completed a larger average percentage of credits

“Students with risk factors who persisted to year three accumulated fewer credits than did those without risk factors.”

attempted as compared to students with risk factors: 75 percent of credits attempted by students with no risk factors were completed, compared with 65 to 72 percent for those with risk factors. And, as seen with other outcome measures, the percentage of credits completed is inversely correlated with the number of risk factors students possessed.

What Does it Mean?

The vast majority—92 percent—of Achieving the Dream students came to college with at least one risk factor. Although students possessing risk factors did not complete or transfer at the same rates as those with no risk factors, the news that persistence through the third year was found to be inversely related to the number of risk factors is encouraging. This could be attributed, in part, to the fact that attending part time was considered a risk factor; within three years, part-time students did not have the opportunity to accumulate the number of credits needed for credential completion or transfer. On the other hand, students possessing risk factors attained lower average GPAs and completed smaller average percentages of credits than did those with no risk factors.

As colleges develop strategies to help at-risk populations succeed in their postsecondary education, they need to consider the specific risk factors their students possess, and the varying ramifications of each risk factor. Also, for students with multiple risk factors, colleges should take into account the likely combinations of factors. While designing programs, colleges can also consider the following:

- What are the characteristics of students who possess risk factors and succeed?
- What can we learn from students who possess risk factors and succeed?
- How can we tailor our programs to help students possessing risk factors achieve their goals?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring their college's data, through the www.dreamwebsubmission.org site. ■

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 at JBL Associates, Inc., and edited by MDC Inc.'s Will Sutton, Achieving the Dream's director of communications and strategic marketing. 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.

Note: This issue of *Data Notes* uses the April 2009 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.