



Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. The initiative aims to help participating colleges identify at-risk student groups in their student populations and then design and implement intervention strategies that will increase the success of these at-risk groups.

Characteristics of Students Who Stop Out

This issue of *Data Notes* is the second of a two-part series studying student stop-out patterns at Achieving the Dream colleges. Results from the previous issue indicated that:

- Slightly more than half of part-time students stopped out by the fall of their second; academic year, compared with 34 to 40 percent of full-time students;
- Female students were less likely to stop out than were male students; and
- Hispanic students were less likely to stop out than were black, white, or Native American students

This issue further describes stop-out rates, examining patterns by student age, developmental referral status, grade point average (GPA) credit completion, and Pell grant status.

Stop-outs are defined as students who did not enroll in a given term, and did not re-enroll for the balance of the year or during the following academic year.¹ Transfer students, or those

obtaining credentials, were not considered stop-outs. When reviewing these results, keep in mind that, given the nature of community college students, there is a chance that students categorized as having stopped out may re-enroll at some point beyond the period studied.²

Age

Regardless of the institution's calendar system, older students were, overall, more likely to stop out by the end of their third academic year than were younger students. Stop-out rates for students under 20 were 10 to 13 percentage points lower than for students between 20 and 24, and students 25 or older (Figure 1).

Interestingly, stop-out patterns differed by age group: Older students were more likely to stop out early in their academic program; however, those persisting to the second and third academic years were less likely to stop out than younger students. Older students may be more likely to enroll for professional development or work-related reasons, and may therefore be more likely to stop out once their course or set of courses has been completed. Older students

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Figure 1. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students¹ who stopped out² by age and term of stop-out

| | Colleges on semesters | | | Colleges on quarters or trimesters | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------|-------------|------------------------------------|-------|-------------|
| | Less than 20 | 20-24 | 25 or older | less than 20 | 20-24 | 25 or older |
| Term 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Term 2 | 17 | 28 | 32 | 13 | 24 | 24 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | 9 | 11 | 11 |
| Total, Year 1 | 17 | 28 | 32 | 22 | 35 | 35 |
| Term 1 | 17 | 20 | 20 | 15 | 16 | 18 |
| Term 2 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 7 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Total, Year 2 | 26 | 29 | 28 | 25 | 26 | 29 |
| Term 1 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 15 | 12 | 12 |
| Term 2 | 8 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 3 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Total, Year 3 | 21 | 18 | 16 | 25 | 19 | 17 |
| Total Years 1, 2 & 3 | 64 | 75 | 77 | 72 | 80 | 82 |

¹ Includes: Earliest cohort for Rounds 1, 2, 3, and 4 (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; 2004 for Round 4).

² Stop-outs are those who did not enroll in the reported term, and did not return or re-enroll during any terms through the following consecutive academic year. Transfer students or those obtaining credentials were not considered stop-outs.

¹ Summer terms were not included in this analysis as many students do not enroll during these terms. Data for the earliest cohorts of all Achieving the Dream participating institutions were included in this analysis (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; and 2004 for Round 4). Students attending institutions on semesters are reported separately from those attending institutions on quarters/trimesters.

² Not all colleges report transfer data, so the annual percentages of students who are reported as having stopped out may be slightly 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. Thus, it is estimated that the annual stop-out rates reported herein may be overstated by as much as 1.5 to 2.5 percentage points. Clery, S. "Transfer Students," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2009.

What Is a Cohort?

A *cohort* is a group of people studied over 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 over time makes it possible to compare the 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 2. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students¹ who stopped out² by developmental education referral status during the first term, and term of stop-out

| | Colleges on semesters | | | | | Colleges on quarters or trimesters | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------|---------|---------|--------------|-------------------------------------|------|---------|---------|--------------|
| | Developmental education referred to | | | | Not referred | Developmental education referred to | | | | Not referred |
| | Any | Math | English | Reading | | Any | Math | English | Reading | |
| Term 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Term 2 | 22 | 22 | 23 | 21 | 28 | 17 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 23 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | - | 10 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 9 |
| Total, Year 1 | 22 | 22 | 23 | 21 | 28 | 27 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 32 |
| Term 1 | 19 | 19 | 20 | 19 | 19 | 16 | 16 | 15 | 15 | 17 |
| Term 2 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | - | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Total, Year 2 | 28 | 28 | 29 | 28 | 27 | 26 | 27 | 26 | 27 | 27 |
| Term 1 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 13 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 12 | 15 |
| Term 2 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Total, Year 3 | 19 | 19 | 18 | 19 | 19 | 21 | 21 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| Total Years 1, 2 & 3 | 69 | 69 | 70 | 69 | 74 | 74 | 75 | 74 | 75 | 80 |

¹ Includes: Earliest cohort for Rounds 1, 2, 3, and 4 (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; 2004 for Round 4).

² Stop outs are those who did not enroll in the reported term, and did not return or re-enroll during any terms through the following consecutive academic year. Transfer students or those obtaining credentials were not considered stop-outs.

who do persist through the third academic year may be more focused on degree attainment, or more likely to take advantage of the transfer option, than younger students. Further research is needed to determine why the stop-out patterns differ for older students at Achieving the Dream colleges.

This finding differs from a previous analysis indicating that older students were less likely than younger students to persist into the second and third years.³ This difference is likely due to the different groups of students included in each analysis.⁴

Developmental Referral Status

A recent study by the National Center for Postsecondary Research compared persistence rates of Florida students assigned to developmental courses with those students just above the referral levels.⁵ The study found that developmental education students had lower stop-out rates through their second academic year than students who placed just above the referral cutoff.

The results for Achieving the Dream students are somewhat similar to those found in Florida, with 74 percent of students not referred and 69 percent of those referred to developmental education in semester-system colleges stopping out by the end of the third year (Figure 2). During their first year, 28 percent of non-referred students stopped out, compared with 22 percent of referred students. During years two and three, stop-out rates for non-referred and referred students were about the same (27 and 28 percent

for the second year; 19 percent for both groups during the third year). Colleges on quarter/trimester systems showed stop-out patterns similar to those on semester systems.

The stop out pattern presented in this issue of *Data Notes* may be attributed to a large number of students who are academically prepared just over the referral level, but would find developmental coursework beneficial. These students may enroll in college-level courses but then find the work too rigorous, leading them to stop out in relatively large numbers. Interestingly, there was little difference between the stop-out rates of referred students when disaggregated by type of developmental education referral; thus, referral status is the issue, not type of developmental education.

Grade Point Average and Credit Load

The academic standing of stop-outs differed depending on when the stop-out occurred. Students who stopped out later in their academic careers had higher average GPAs than students who stopped out earlier: Students who stopped out at the end of their first year had average GPAs lower than the generally accepted “passing grade” of 2.00 – 1.37 and 1.73, respectively, at semester- and quarter/trimester-system colleges (Figure 3). However, those who stopped out during the second academic year had GPAs averaging above the 2.00 mark – 2.10 and 2.43, respectively. Students who stopped out during the third academic year achieved yet higher GPAs – 2.50 and 2.90, respectively.

³ Clery, S. “Outcome Differences Across Age Groups,” *Data Notes*, Vol. 3, No. 2, March/April 2008. Available online at: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/DATARESEARCH/DATANOTESNEWSLETTER/default.tp>.

⁴ This issue of *Data Notes* analyzes first-year data from all Achieving the Dream institutions. Our previous analysis included only the Fall 2003 cohort from 55 of the 81 Achieving the Dream colleges.

⁵ Calcagno, J. and Long, B. (2008). *The Impact of Postsecondary Remediation Using a Regression Discontinuity Approach: Addressing Endogenous Sorting and Noncompliance*. National Center for Postsecondary Research.

Figure 3. Cumulative GPA and credits attempted and completed for Achieving the Dream full-time¹ students² who stopped out³ and term of stop out

| | Colleges on semesters | | | | Colleges on quarters or trimesters | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| | Cumulative GPA | Number of credits attempted, cumulative | Number of credits completed, cumulative | Percentage of credits completed | Cumulative GPA | Number of credits attempted, cumulative | Number of credits completed, cumulative | Percentage of credits completed |
| Term 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Term 2 | 1.37 | 13.2 | 6.6 | 49.0 | 1.46 | 15.5 | 6.3 | 42.9 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | 2.06 | 28.1 | 17.7 | 62.4 |
| Total, Year 1 | 1.37 | 13.2 | 6.6 | 49.0 | 1.73 | 20.8 | 11.2 | 51.3 |
| Term 1 | 2.08 | 25.7 | 17.6 | 66.7 | 2.47 | 47.3 | 38.1 | 76.7 |
| Term 2 | 2.14 | 36.1 | 24.1 | 65.7 | 2.33 | 53.5 | 41.0 | 72.8 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | 2.44 | 65.5 | 49.6 | 73.2 |
| Total, Year 2 | 2.10 | 29.0 | 19.7 | 66.4 | 2.43 | 51.2 | 40.3 | 75.3 |
| Term 1 | 2.52 | 53.9 | 41.1 | 75.5 | 3.02 | 93.1 | 84.5 | 88.5 |
| Term 2 | 2.48 | 61.9 | 43.1 | 72.4 | 2.69 | 91.4 | 76.4 | 81.5 |
| Term 3 | - | - | - | - | 2.64 | 94.2 | 78.0 | 79.8 |
| Total, Year 3 | 2.50 | 56.7 | 41.8 | 74.4 | 2.90 | 92.9 | 82.0 | 85.9 |
| Total Years 1, 2 & 3 | 2.09 | 35.1 | 24.5 | 65.2 | 2.39 | 56.4 | 46.0 | 71.8 |

¹ Full-time during the first-term of enrollment

² Includes: Earliest cohort for Rounds 1, 2, 3, and 4 (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; 2004 for Round 4).

³ Stop-outs are those who did not enroll in the reported term, and did not return or re-enroll during any terms through the following consecutive academic year. Transfer students or those obtaining credentials were not considered stop outs.

Likewise, students who stopped out later completed greater percentages of credits attempted than did students who stopped out earlier. At semester-system colleges, students who stopped out during their first year completed 49 percent of the credits they attempted, compared to 67 and 74 percent for students who stopped out during the second and third academic years. The same pattern was evident at colleges on quarters/trimesters.

Pell Grant Status

Past research indicates that students who did not receive Pell grants had higher stop-out rates than Pell grant recipients.^{6,7} Consistent with the

research, the data revealed that stop-out rates differed for students according to Pell grant status, with students receiving Pell grants less likely to stop out than non-recipients. Overall, 75 percent of non-recipients attending semester-system colleges stopped out, compared with 68 percent of recipients (Figure 4).

Of particular note is the marked increase in the percentage of Pell grant recipients who stopped out between the end of the first year and the beginning of the second year. Fifteen percent of students stopped out in year 1, term 2, while 23 percent stopped out in year 2, term 1. This is likely due to the fact that Pell grant status is determined during

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Figure 4. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students¹ who stopped out² by Pell grant status and term of stop out

| | Colleges on semesters | | Colleges on quarters or trimesters | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Received Pell grant | Did not receive Pell grant | Received Pell grant | Did not receive Pell grant |
| Term 1 | - | - | - | - |
| Term 2 | 15 | 29 | 14 | 20 |
| Term 3 | - | - | 11 | 9 |
| Total, Year 1 | 15 | 29 | 25 | 30 |
| Term 1 | 23 | 18 | 19 | 16 |
| Term 2 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 7 |
| Term 3 | - | - | 5 | 4 |
| Total, Year 2 | 31 | 27 | 30 | 26 |
| Term 1 | 14 | 12 | 13 | 13 |
| Term 2 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Term 3 | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| Total, Year 3 | 21 | 18 | 21 | 21 |
| Total Years 1, 2 & 3 | 68 | 75 | 75 | 77 |

¹ Includes: Earliest cohort for Rounds 1, 2, 3, and 4 (2002 for Rounds 1 and 2; 2003 for Round 3; 2004 for Round 4).

² Stop outs are those who did not enroll in the reported term, and did not return or re-enroll during any terms through the following consecutive academic year. Transfer students or those obtaining credentials were not considered stop outs.

⁶ Bettinger, E. (2004). *How Financial Aid Effects Persistence*. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper No. W10242.

⁷ Clery, S. "Do Pell Grants Make a Difference?," *Data Notes*, May 2006, Vol. 1, No. 4. Available online at: http://www.achievingthedream.org/_pdfs/DataNotes/May2006.pdf.

the student's first enrollment period. Although the majority of students continue receiving Pell grants throughout their education, a large number may lose eligibility for their second year and consequently not re-enroll, thereby causing the large stop-out rate at the beginning of the second year.

What Does this Mean?

Although many national studies have shown age as a risk factor for stopping out⁸, this analysis suggests that at Achieving the Dream colleges, older students who stay in college through the first year are more likely to persist into their third academic year than are younger students. This phenomenon could be due to a larger percentage of older students enrolling in short programs and not applying for the final credential, or taking a few specific courses related to their career field. Both of these scenarios could explain the higher rates of attrition for older students during the first year, with a drop in stop-out rates in ensuing years.

Consistent with the research is the finding that students referred to developmental education were less likely to stop out than those not referred. As stated, this could be due to a large portion of students whose academic preparation falls just above the level where developmental referrals occur. These students may benefit from developmental coursework just as much as those referred. Further research should be conducted to determine the characteristics and outcomes of students on the developmental referral boundary.

Students' academic standing at the point of stop-out revealed interesting results, as those who stopped out later in their academic careers achieved higher GPAs and completed larger portions of attempted credits than those who stopped out earlier. These findings may suggest that early stop-outs are related in some way to academic reasons. However, later stop-outs may occur for non-academic reasons.

Also consistent with past research is the finding that Pell grant recipients were less likely to stop out than those who did not receive Pell grants.

However, the large increase seen in stop-out rates for Pell grant recipients at the beginning of the second year likely coincides with a loss of Pell eligibility for a large number of students.

These findings raise questions about the types of students who stop out and their different stop-out patterns. The following questions can help guide your discussions regarding students who stop out:

- Are older students' stop-out patterns different than those of younger students? At what point are the majority of stop-outs occurring for the various age groups? What programs are in place to aid students of different ages at different points in their academic careers?
- Are Pell grant recipients more or less likely to persist? Can we identify the stop-out patterns, and additional characteristics, that put students at greater risk of stopping out?
- Is financial aid a contributing factor to increased stop-out rates in consecutive terms? Why do these students lose their eligibility? Is there something we can do for these students? Can we help them prepare financial aid forms, provide financial assistance or provide other financial guidance?
- Is there a relationship between developmental education cut scores and persistence? Are there students whose academic abilities place them just above developmental referral level? Would these students benefit from developmental education coursework?
- Do students who stop out later have higher GPAs and complete a greater percentage of the credits they attempt? If so, why are these students stopping out? Is their decision financial, academic, or is there some other reason?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college 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.

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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.

Note: This issue of *Data Notes* uses the April 2008 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). *Findings From the Condition of Education 1997: No. 13 Postsecondary Persistence and Attainment*: (U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement/NCES 97-984). Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.