



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.

Population Characteristics and Student Outcomes

Student performance and persistence are influenced by a variety of factors. National studies have shown that minority and low-income students are more at risk than other types of students for stopping and dropping out of college. Colleges that enroll specific student populations may find it helpful to compare themselves with others having the same mix of students. Colleges can gain a better understanding of their students' progress by comparing themselves to peers.

This issue of Data Notes focuses on Achieving the Dream colleges that serve high percentages of Hispanic, black, and low-income students.¹ Institutions were assigned to one of three peer groups: those serving large populations of (1) Hispanic students, (2) black students, or (3) low-income students. Institutions were considered to have large percentages of black or Hispanic students if 20 percent or more of their students were from either racial/ethnic group. The percentage of students receiving Pell Grants was used as a proxy for low-income status; institutions with 35 percent or more students receiving Pell Grants were considered to have large low-income populations for the purposes of this study.²

In order to determine if differences do exist, outcome measures for students in the peer groups were compared to those in the related non-peer group institutions (for example, students in institutions with large populations of black students were compared with those in institutions that do not have a large population of black students; comparisons were conducted at the individual student level). Average cumulative grade point average (GPA), credit accumulation, and second-term, second-year, and third-year persistence were compared for the various groups. GPAs and the number of credits accumulated were computed for those who persisted through the third year.

Enrollment Characteristics

The enrollment characteristics of students in the studied groups differed:

- Men represented 39 percent of the student body in institutions enrolling large populations of low-income students. Men were only 40 percent of the enrollment in colleges with a high proportion of black students. In both cases, men comprised 44 percent of the enrollment in the comparison colleges. A different outcome was found for colleges serving large Hispanic populations. In those, 44 percent of the student body was male, compared with 42 percent in the comparison colleges (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Percentage of base cohort Achieving the Dream students¹ by selected characteristics and peer institution group²

	Percent of students in institutions with...	Percent male	Percent full-time in first term	Age distribution		
				Under 20	20-24	25 and over
Total	100	43	52	47	25	27
Large Hispanic population						
Yes	37	44	52	46	27	26
No	63	42	52	48	24	28
Large black population						
Yes	31	40	49	44	27	29
No	69	44	53	49	25	27
Large low-income population						
Yes	30	39	57	46	26	28
No	70	44	50	48	25	27

¹Base cohort students are as follows: 2002 cohort for rounds 1 and 2; 2003 cohort for round 3; 2004 cohort for round 4

²Institutions included in the respective peer groups have a minimum of 20 percent of students African American or Hispanic, or 35 percent Pell recipients; Pell receipt is the indicator of income for Achieving the Dream.

¹Baseline year data are utilized for this analysis. The baseline data used are as follows: Round 1 – 2002 cohort, Round 2 – 2002 cohort, Round 3 – 2003 cohort, Round 4 – 2004 cohort. Peer groups are not mutually exclusive; institutions may appear in more than one peer group.

² Although Pell Grants can aid students in achieving their goals and succeeding in college, it is the initiative's means of measuring low income. Care should be used in interpreting results displayed by Pell status.

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.

- Fifty-seven percent of students at low-income institutions attended college on a full-time basis during the first semester, compared with 50 percent of those in non-low-income institutions. This could be due to the fact that, by definition, low-income students receive Pell grants. Receipt of the Pell grant may alleviate financial pressures otherwise present and allow the student to attend on a full-time basis. Thus, students with Pell grants are more likely to attend on a full-time basis.
- Forty-nine percent of students at institutions with large percentages of black students attended part-time, compared with 53 percent of their peers.
- All three groups of colleges were more likely than their comparison colleges to enroll students over 20 years of age.

Persistence

The persistence rates for students in each of the peer groups differed. It is noteworthy that students in institutions both the Hispanic and black population peer groups persisted at higher rates than those in the comparison groups on each measure, with one exception where persistence rates were the same (Figure 2). Students attending institutions in the Hispanic peer group persisted to the second term at a rate that was 4 percentage points higher than those in the non-peer group (73 compared with 69 percent), and 3 percentage points higher for persistence to the second and third years—60 and 47 percent, respectively, compared with 57 and 44 percent.

Seventy-two percent of the students at institutions in the black peer group persisted to their second term, and 59 percent persisted to their second year. That compares with a first-year persistence rate of 70 percent for students at the comparison colleges, and 58 percent persisting to the second year. Third year persistence was not significantly different for students attending institutions in the black peer group as compared

to the non-peer group—45 percent.

Persistence rates to the second term for students in the low-income peer group were higher than the comparative non-peer group, 72 percent compared with 70 percent. This changed in the second and third years. Fifty-six percent of the students at colleges in the low-income peer group returned in the second year, and 41 percent returned in the third year. This was significantly lower than the comparison colleges, where 59 percent of the students returned in the second year, and 47 percent in the third year. The early persistence rates may be affected by the initiative's definition of low income—or receipt of Pell grants—as students with Pell grants tend to persist at higher rates than those without Pell grants.

These measures represent college outcomes, not the outcomes for students with particular characteristics. The majority of students in these colleges do not share the identifying characteristic. Factors other than student characteristics may account for differences in outcomes.

GPA and Credits Earned

Students at institutions with large populations of Hispanic students who persisted into their third year attained higher cumulative GPAs (2.68) than students at the comparative non-peer institutions (2.63), while there was no significant differences in the cumulative GPA (Figure 3) between students at black and low income serving institutions.

For students persisting through the third year, those attending institutions with large portions of Hispanic or low-income students accumulated slightly more credits (46 and 47) than the 45 credits accumulated by students in both comparison groups. The reverse was true for students attending institutions with large percentages of black students; they accumulated 45 credits, compared with 46 credits for students in the comparison colleges.

It is noteworthy that students at institutions with large percentages of Hispanic students completed

Figure 2. Percentage of base cohort¹ Achieving the Dream students persisting², by institutional peer group³

Peer Group	Second term	Second year	Third year
Total	70	58	45
Large Hispanic population			
Yes	73	60	47
No	69	57	44
Large black population			
Yes	72	59	45
No	70	58	45
Large low-income population			
Yes	72	56	41
No	70	59	47

¹Base cohort students are as follows: 2002 cohort for rounds 1 and 2; 2003 cohort for round 3; 2004 cohort for round 4.

²Persistors include those who are enrolled, transferred or attained credentials.

³Institutions included in the respective peer groups have a minimum of 20 percent of African American or Hispanic students, or 35 percent Pell recipients; Pell receipt is the indicator of low income for Achieving the Dream.

Figure 3. Cumulative grade point average and average credits accumulated of base cohort Achieving the Dream students¹ persisting to the third year², by institutional peer group³

Peer Group	Cumulative GPA	Average number of credits accumulated	Percentage of credits completed
Total	2.65	45	77%
Large Hispanic population			
Yes	2.68	46	70%
No	2.63	45	82%
Large black population			
Yes	2.65	45	80%
No	2.65	46	76%
Large low-income population			
Yes	2.66	47	80%
No	2.65	45	76%

¹Base cohort students are as follows: 2002 cohort for rounds 1 and 2; 2003 cohort for round 3; 2004 cohort for round 4.

²Persistors include those who are enrolled, transferred or attained credentials.

³Institutions included in the respective peer groups have a minimum of 20 percent of African American or Hispanic students, or 35 percent Pell recipients; Pell receipt is the indicator of low income for Achieving the Dream.

70 percent of the credits they attempted, compared with 82 percent for students attending the comparison colleges, indicating they attempted significantly more credits than students at non-peer institutions, yet completed fewer credits. In contrast, students at institutions with large percentages of black or low-income students displayed the opposite in terms of course-completion behaviors, completing higher portions of the courses they attempted (80 percent for both peer groups) than their non-peer institutions (76 percent for both non-peer groups).

What Does This Mean?

This analysis reveals the noteworthy result that although we are talking about institutions enrolling high populations of at-risk students—those with large populations of Hispanic, black, or low-income students—these peer group institutions often displayed better outcome measures than their comparison groups. In many cases, persistence rates for students attending colleges serving large populations of students traditionally labeled at-risk were higher than those of students attending the comparison colleges. The exception was second- and third-year persistence for students attending institutions with large populations of low-income students. However, keep in mind that we are comparing institutions containing large populations of students with a certain characteristic, and not students with the characteristic; other related variables may be causing some of the results seen here. Helping students survive the first year of college is critical, but there may be important events in students' lives after the first year to which colleges need to be sensitive.

Students in colleges with large populations of Hispanic students accumulated more credits than those in the comparison colleges, but had a much lower ratio of credits completed. These students attempted a substantially larger number of credits, but completed only slightly more than students in the comparison colleges. However,

the reverse was true for students in institutions with large populations of black and low-income students, where their percentage of credits completed ratio indicates that students completed a larger portion of the credits they attempted than those in the non-peer comparison groups. Once again, this suggests that the averages might hide important differences among institutions that may affect student outcomes.

This issue indicates there are differences in the outcomes of students that enroll in institutions with large populations of students with certain characteristics, as compared with those in institutions that do not enroll large proportions of these populations. Therefore, the following questions arise for Achieving the Dream institutions:

- Does your institution enroll large populations of students with specific risk characteristics?
- Does enrolling large populations of at-risk students affect your institution's outcomes?
- Do the outcomes for your at-risk students differ from the outcomes displayed by the rest of your students?
- How do your institution's outcomes compare to a similar peer group of colleges?

Colleges can refer to the Achieving the Dream website (www.achievingthedream.org) to review the strategies being developed by institutions participating in the initiative to facilitate increases in successes and outcomes of at-risk populations.

Achieving the Dream's Database

Achieving the Dream colleges can use the Achieving the Dream database created by JBL Associates, Inc., to replicate the analysis presented here for their own institutions. This analysis might help colleges identify areas of their curricula or groups of students needing special attention. ■

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.

This report uses the February 2008 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Colleges are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.