

## 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.

## Grade Point Average and Student Outcomes

It is generally assumed that students with better academic achievement are more likely to persist and complete credentials than are those who struggle academically. At the least, students must maintain a specified minimum academic standing to be able to continue their coursework, retain federal financial aid eligibility, and in some institutions, participate in athletics and other activities beyond their regular coursework. Community college students with higher grades are more likely to transfer into four-year institutions than are those with lower grades, and academic standing can affect job prospects.

This issue of *Data Notes* investigates the academic achievement patterns of students attending Achieving the Dream colleges. Are students who struggle with their academics less likely to persist than better performing students? Is the assumption correct that they are less likely to

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complete their credentials or transfer? What are the outcomes for students with different characteristics but comparable grade point averages?

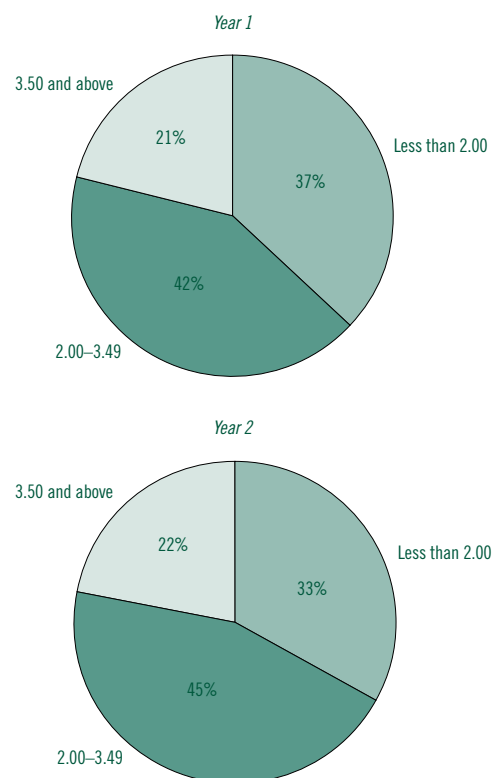
This analysis examines students' five-year outcomes based on their grades at the end of the first and second academic years.<sup>1</sup> Students were placed into three groups based on their cumulative grade point averages (GPAs): those struggling academically with GPAs less than 2.00, those in the mid-range of 2.00 to 3.49, and high academic achievers with GPAs of 3.50 and higher. Students were then followed through the fifth academic year to determine outcome differences between the three academic groups. Differences in outcomes were also analyzed by race/ethnicity and Pell grant receipt.

### Grade Point Average

About one-fifth (21 percent) of students attending Achieving the Dream colleges fell into the high academic achiever group and had GPAs of 3.50 or higher at the end of their first year (Figure 1). Forty-two percent of students were

in the mid-range with GPAs between 2.00 and 3.49, and 37 percent of students struggled with GPAs of less than 2.00.

**Figure 1.** Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by cumulative grade point average in years 1 and 2



Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts for Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

Students' GPAs for year two were computed only for those students who attended at some point during the academic year. As would be expected, GPAs were slightly higher for those attending in year two, with 46 percent of students falling into the mid-range of GPAs—2.00 to 3.49—four percentage points higher than those attending in year one. Fewer students who attended during year two had GPAs of less than 2.00 than did in year one—33 percent. Interestingly, 21 percent of students in both year one and year two had GPAs of 3.50 or higher.

The overall larger proportion of students with higher GPAs in year two is likely due

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Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

<sup>1</sup> Data in this report reflect the 2002 and 2003 cohorts from Round 1 and 2 colleges.

## 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.

to the fact that students with low GPAs in year one were less likely to return in year two than those with higher GPAs.<sup>2</sup> Those students who did return may have adapted to college coursework, and thus improved their grades.

## Fifth Year Outcomes

As expected, students with GPAs of 2.00 and above were more likely to persist, transfer or complete credentials by year five than were students with cumulative GPAs below 2.00.

*“At least 40 percent of students with year one GPAs of 2.00 or higher completed, transferred or were still enrolled by year five, compared with 21 percent for those with GPAs less than 2.00.”*

At least 40 percent of students with year one GPAs of 2.00 or higher completed, transferred or were still enrolled by year five, compared with 21 percent for those with GPAs less than 2.00 (Figure 2). Thirty-two percent of students with first-year GPAs of 3.50 and above completed credentials or transferred by year five, compared with only 10 percent of students with first-year GPAs of less than 2.00. Students with first-year GPAs between 2.00 and 3.49 had completion and transfer rates not far off those of high-achieving students, although they were more likely to still be enrolled.

Naturally, students who enrolled in the second year were more likely to have completed, transferred or continued enrollment by the fifth year than were those based on just the first

year’s GPAs. Yet the patterns were comparable as higher achieving students were more likely to have completed or transferred by the end of the fifth year than were those with lower GPAs. And, outcomes for students with GPAs of 2.00 to 3.50 were similar to those of students with GPAs of 3.50 or higher, rather than those with GPAs of less than 2.00. Forty-seven percent of the students attaining GPAs of 2.00 to 3.49 and persisting to the second year did not enroll, complete or transfer by the end of the fifth year, nor did 43 percent of students with a GPA of 3.50 or higher. Students with GPAs of less than 2.00 had a loss rate of 70 percent.

Not surprisingly, the completion and transfer rate was highest for students with GPAs of 3.50 or higher (45 percent), followed by those with mid-range GPAs (36 percent). Only 13 percent of the students who struggled through the second year completed or transferred by the end of year five.

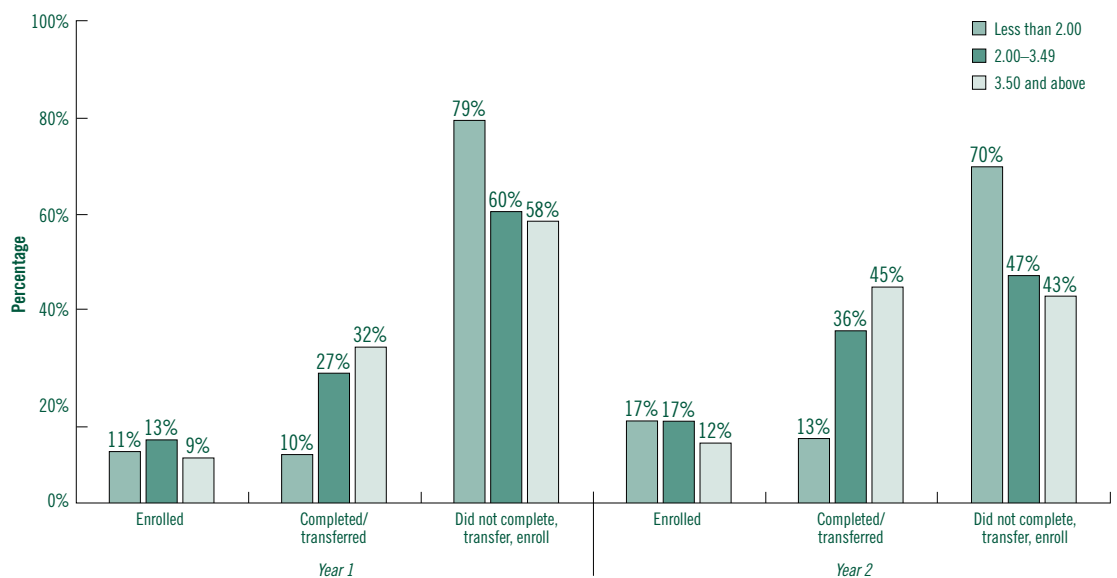
Contrary to expectation, the same proportion—17 percent—of students were still enrolled in year five, whether the student had achieved less than a 2.00 GPA by the end of year two or attained a mid-range GPA.

## Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 3 displays the five-year outcomes by year one GPA and race/ethnicity. Interestingly, aside from Asian/Pacific Islander students, high-achieving students had comparable persistence and completion rates regardless of race/ethnicity, with just slightly fewer Hispanic and Native American students persisting or completing—a 2 percentage point difference. However, wider

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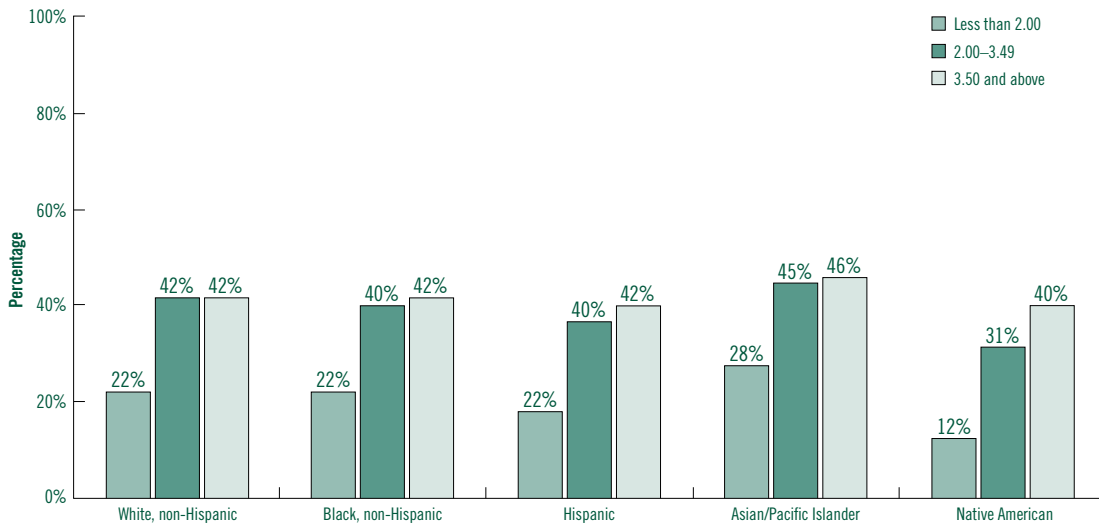
**Figure 2.** Fifth-year enrollment outcomes of Achieving the Dream students by cumulative grade point average in years 1 and 2



Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts from Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

<sup>2</sup> Forty-four percent of students with low GPAs (less than 2.00) at the end of year one enrolled in year two, compared with 75 and 70 percent of those with mid-range and high GPAs.

**Figure 3.** Percentage of Achieving the Dream students who persisted, transferred, or received credentials by the fifth year, by race/ethnicity, and cumulative grade point average in year 1



Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts from Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

differences in outcomes occurred among students with mid-range GPAs. Hispanic and Native American students were the least likely to persist, complete or transfer compared with white or black students by year five if they had a GPA below 2.00 during their first year.

“...high-achieving students had comparable persistence and completion rates regardless of race/ethnicity...”

Comparable percentages of students with second-year GPAs of 3.50 or higher persisted, completed or transferred by the end of year five, regardless of race/ethnicity. The Hispanic persistence rate was slightly lower at 55 percent,

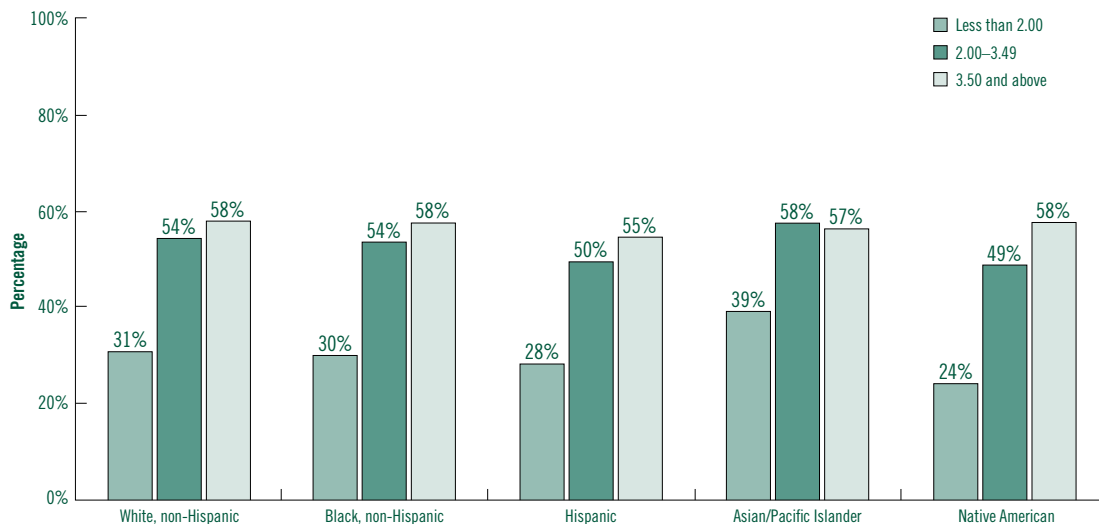
compared with 57 and 58 percent for other student groups (Figure 4). Again, differences were most evident for students with second-year GPAs between 2.00 and 3.49, with Hispanic and Native Americans persisting, completing and enrolling at lower rates than white and black students. This outcome was also evident for students with second-year GPAs below 2.00.

### Pell Grant Receipt

Although federal requirements do not tie Pell grant receipt to GPA, institutions require satisfactory academic progress (SAP) for continued receipt. Each institution defines its own SAP, often based on a minimum GPA. Pell grant receipt is the initiative’s indicator of low income

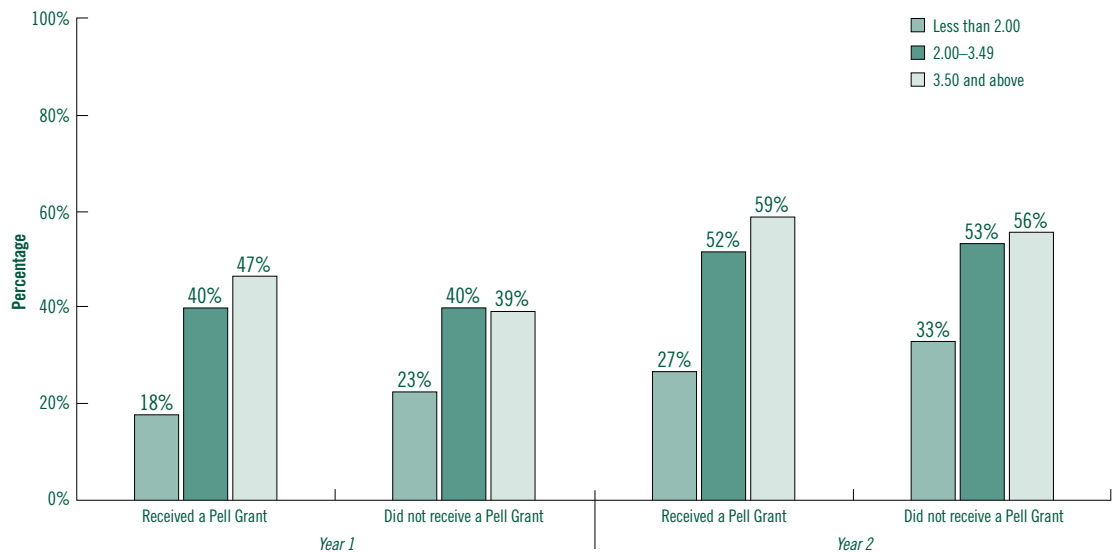
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**Figure 4.** Percentage of Achieving the Dream students who persisted, transferred, or received credentials by the fifth year, by race/ethnicity, and cumulative grade point average in year 2



Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts from Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

**Figure 5.** Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students who persisted, transferred, or received a credential by year 5, by Pell Grant status, and cumulative grade point average in years 1 and 2



Note: Includes the 2002 and 2003 cohorts from Rounds 1 and 2 colleges.

status, and Pell Grant recipients have different outcomes compared to non-recipients.

Figure 5 displays the year five outcomes by year one and year two GPA. Interestingly, regardless of the GPA year, high-achieving students who received Pell grants were more likely to persist, complete or transfer than were those who did

*“...high-achieving students who received Pell grants were more likely to persist, complete or transfer than were those who did not receive Pell grants...”*

not receive Pell grants. The difference was greater for year one GPA, 47 percent for recipients, compared with 39 percent for non-recipients. This finding is consistent with past research that shows students possessing multiple indicators of credential completion were more likely to receive Pell grants or federal loans than were those with moderate or few indicators.<sup>3</sup> Pell grant receipt indicates stronger student motivation to complete: if a student makes the extra effort to apply for and obtain a Pell grant, he or she is more motivated to complete a credential or persist.

Also interesting is the fact that students with mid-range GPAs had similar persistence, completion and transfer rates, regardless of Pell receipt. Further, among students with low GPAs, fewer Pell grant recipients had positive outcomes than non-recipients. This may be due to the fact that a student with a low GPA does not meet the institution's SAP; therefore, the student does not

continue to receive the Pell grant, and likely cannot afford to continue. The additional financial concerns can add burden to low-income students who are likely to have other risk factors and barriers to successful outcomes, additional burdens that non-recipients did not have. Perhaps the latter were able to overcome the academic issues, while the Pell grant recipients were forced to find methods to overcome academic issues along with financial issues; they may have had too many barriers to overcome.

### What Does This Mean?

These outcomes for students attending Achieving the Dream colleges confirm that academic achievement is correlated with the likelihood of a positive outcome. However, the results are not consistent across student groups: When academic achievement is held constant, race/ethnicity still plays a role in predicting positive outcomes. Other characteristics that can vary across student groups can also have an effect on persistence and completion, even when academic achievement is similar: Income, needing to care for dependents, and having to work are among influences that can affect outcomes. Pell grant receipt improved outcomes for high academic achievers but did not improve outcomes for students who started with a low GPA.

Oftentimes, developing a detailed analysis leads to an understanding of the topic's complexity. In general, students who pass their classes early in their academic careers have better long-term outcomes; however, key differences exist among

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<sup>3</sup> Horn, L. *On Track to Complete? A Taxonomy of Beginning Community College Students and Their Outcomes 3 Years After Enrolling: 2003-04 Through 2006*. NCES 2009-152. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. July 2009. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009152.pdf>.

groups. This analysis points to several interesting questions that can help steer campus discussions and decisions.

- What early indicators can be developed that predict first-year grades? Which student groups are more likely to achieve higher grades, and which ones struggle?
- Do students with similar grades, but from different groups, achieve at different levels?
- What can be done to help students who do not pass classes early in their career?

- What causes students with acceptable GPAs to leave college without achieving their goals?
- What other factors beyond those included here might be related to GPA? Does age, gender, enrollment status, or major field of study affect outcomes?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college's data, at [www.dreamwebsubmission.org](http://www.dreamwebsubmission.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. Edited by MDC Inc.'s 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 June 2009 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.*