Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream, Inc. is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Evidence-based, student-centered, and built on the values of equity and excellence, Achieving the Dream is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by: 1) improving results at institutions, 2) influencing public policy, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public. Conceived as an initiative in 2004 by Lumina Foundation and seven founding partner organizations, today, Achieving the Dream is the largest non-governmental reform movement for student success in higher education history. With 160 community colleges and institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 16 state policy teams —working throughout 30 states and the District of Columbia—Achieving the Dream helps 3.5 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.

Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

www.achievingthedream.org

Finding Opportunities to Nudge Student Groups Over the Finish Line: Examining Students' Five-Year Progress

Past research has revealed that students who complete coursework in a concentrated area, defined as completing three or more courses in a specific field of study, are much more likely to have successful outcomes than those who do not. Moreover, fewer than half of students included in this research, which followed students over seven years, entered into concentrated fields of study.[1]

Of students attending Achieving the Dream's earliest participating colleges, students still enrolled after three years accumulated an average of about 60 credits. Students still enrolled during the fourth year, accumulated an average of about 70 credits; fifth year, nearly 80 credits; and sixth or seventh years, well over 80 credits.[2] Assuming 60 credits are needed to attain an associate's degree, these students with long-term enrollments are accumulating credits above and beyond that required for credentials.

> *Students still enrolled during the fourth year, accumulated an average of about 70 credits; fifth year, nearly 80 credits; and sixth or seventh years, well over 80 credits.*

Students accumulating large numbers of credits without attaining credentials or transferring could be the result of a lack of focus on a particular pathway or program of study. Credential-seeking students who complete large numbers of courses, but are not necessarily following coherent pathways, are at risk of becoming frustrated and dropping out. Many community college students, especially those who are first-generation and are from low socioeconomic status families, may not have the experience or the opportunity to receive guidance from friends and family to help them navigate and pursue coher-

ent academic pathways. Adding to the problem, as institutional finances tighten, institutions may restrict student services, including guidance counselors and advisors.

This analysis investigates students' outcomes after five years—did they complete, transfer, or were they still enrolled?[3] If they did not complete or transfer, the number of credits the student accumulated is examined. Five-year outcomes by race/ethnicity, Pell Grant status, attendance status, major field area, and the number of developmental subjects referred to were examined to determine if differences occur by student groups.

Five Year Outcomes

Figure 1 displays the distribution of students according to the outcome by the end of the fifth year: over half (57 percent) of students were no longer enrolled, but had accumulated credits—some just a few and others over 60. Nine percent of students were no longer enrolled and did not earn any credits.

Interestingly, a large number of students accumulated significant numbers of credits, yet did not complete or transfer and were no longer enrolled during the fifth year: 20 percent accumulated 25 or more credits and 4 percent accumulated more than 60 credits.[4] Identifying these students and determining their reasons for leaving the institution without earning credentials or transferring could help to devise strategies and programs that might easily turn some of these students into successful outcomes.

By the end of the fifth year, 15 percent of students completed some type of credential and 9 percent transferred to other institutions. An additional 10 percent of students were still enrolled, with the majority of these students accumulating 25 or more credits and a significant portion earning 37 or more.

Race/Ethnicity

Asian/Pacific Islander and White students were more likely to complete credentials or transfer when compared with Native American, Black, or

---

[1] Jenkins, D. & Weiss, M. J. *Charting Pathways to Completion for Low-Income Community College Students* (CCRC Working Paper No. 34). New York, Community College Research Center, Teachers College Columbia University: September 2011. Available: http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=962.

[2] JBL Associate's Inc. analysis of Achieving the Dream data for Round 1 colleges for the Coach and Data Coach meeting, Orlando, FL: October 2011.

[3] The 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 student cohorts (603,879 students), those with five years of data available, from all Achieving the Dream colleges were included in this analysis.
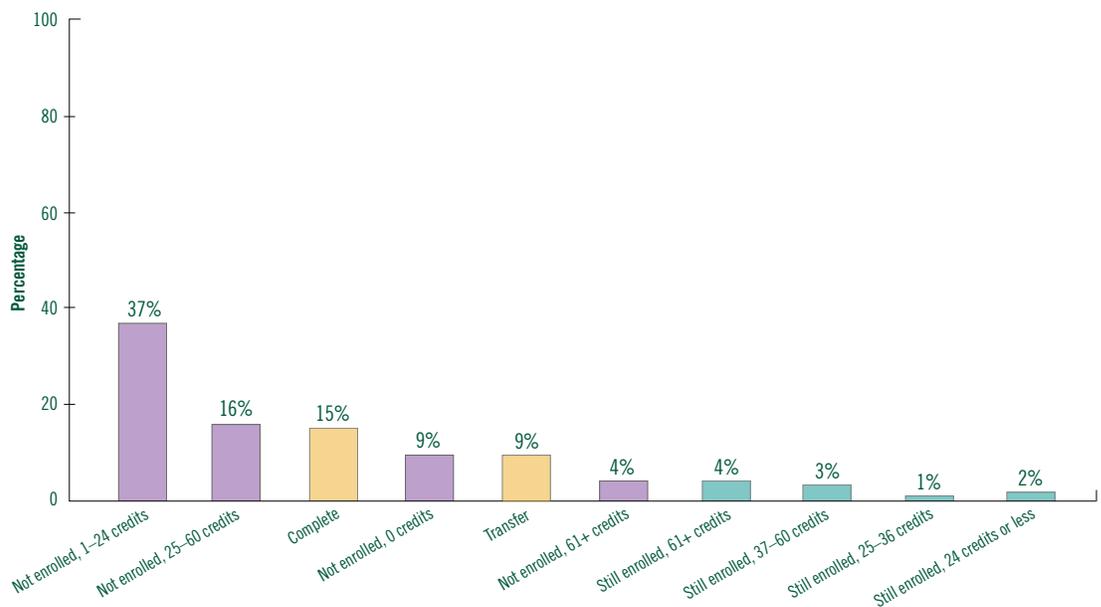
Figure 1. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students at the end of 5 years by outcome

Note: Includes 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 student cohorts.

Hispanic students (Figure 2). Noteworthy here are the larger than average percentages of Native American, Black, or Hispanic students who were no longer enrolled during the fifth year, yet have accumulated credits, especially the large portion of Native Americans who accumulated 25 to 60 credits (20 percent compared with 16 percent overall). Also noteworthy is the slightly larger than average percentage of Hispanic students who were still enrolled and accumulated 25 or more credits by the end of the fifth year, including those who earned 61 or more credits.

Pell Grant Status

Completion rates by Pell Grant status were similar, but Pell Grant recipients were less likely than non-recipients to transfer by the end of the fifth year, 7 compared with 10 percent. Noteworthy is the finding that Pell Grant recipients who were no longer enrolled were more likely to have accumulated large numbers of credits, while non-recipients who left did so with fewer. This may be due to the fact that students who receive financial aid are more likely to persist than those who do not, thus had more time to accumulate more credits. Yet as more time goes by, the recipient may lose Pell eligibility due to changes in finances[5] or the inability to meet satisfactory academic progress requirements.[6] The loss of the grant may make it harder for a student to continue their education, even after significant credit accumulation.

Attendance Status

Not surprisingly, students attending full-time during the first term were more likely to complete or transfer by the end of the fifth year compared

> *Noteworthy is the percentage of students who attended full-time during the first term, accumulated 25 or more credits, did not complete or transfer, and were no longer enrolled.*

with students who initially enrolled part-time, 29 compared with 18 percent. Noteworthy is the percentage of students who attended full-time during the first term, accumulated 25 or more credits, did not complete or transfer, and were no longer enrolled. Determining the reasons why these students who had made significant educational progress were no longer enrolled after the fifth year may help identify things that the college can do to promote successful outcomes as measured by credential or transfer.

Nearly one-half (48 percent) of students beginning part-time completed less than 25 credits and were no longer enrolled at the end of the fifth year. These could be students enrolling for purposes other than seeking credentials—for

---

[4] This 4 percent of students who attained over 60 credits but were no longer enrolled, did not complete or transfer by the end of the fifth year accounts for about 24,000 of the original 604,000 students studied.

[5] 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. Available: http://www.achievingthedream.org/_pdfs/datanotes/DataNotes-MayJune-2007.pdf

[6] To meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), a student must maintain a 2.00 GPA and show progression towards graduation. Progression towards gradation is determined by the number or percentage of courses, credit hours, or clock hours needed to complete the program times 150 percent. If it becomes apparent that the student cannot finish the program within this period, he or she becomes ineligible for aid.

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students at the end of 5 years by outcome and selected student characteristics

Student characteristic	Complete	Transfer	Still enrolled with...			Not enrolled with...			
			24 or less credits	25–60 credits	61+ credits	0 credits	1–24 credits	25–50 credits	61+ credits
Total	**15**	**9**	**2**	**4**	**4**	**9**	**37**	**16**	**4**
Race/ethnicity									
Native American	10	6	1	3	3	11	42	20	5
Asian/Pacific Islander	20	11	2	5	6	7	30	14	6
Black	11	8	2	4	5	12	40	15	3
White	16	10	2	4	3	8	36	16	4
Hispanic	13	6	3	6	5	10	39	15	4
Pell status									
No Pell Grant received	13	10	2	4	3	10	39	15	4
Pell Grant received	14	7	2	5	5	8	36	18	5
Attendance status, first term									
Full-time	19	10	1	4	5	6	28	20	6
Part-time	10	8	3	5	3	12	48	10	2
Major									
Terminal-seeking	16	7	2	4	3	10	38	16	4
Transfer-seeking	14	10	2	5	4	8	36	16	4
Undeclared	11	6	2	5	4	10	44	14	3
Number of developmental subjects referred									
None	19	10	2	3	3	8	37	14	4
One	15	8	2	5	4	9	35	17	5
Two	11	7	2	5	5	10	38	17	4
Three	9	6	2	5	4	13	41	15	4

Note: Includes 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 student cohorts.

example, bolstering skills for employment or a current job, fulfilling requirements for an occupational certificate, or completing general education requirements while enrolled in a four-year institution.

Major Field of Study

Supporting the proposition that students in specific pathways are more likely to achieve success than those who are not, the results show that students in declared major fields achieve higher outcomes than those who are undeclared: 23 and 24 percent of students in transfer-seeking and terminal-seeking major fields completed or transferred compared with 17 percent of those who enrolled without declaring majors. Further, 44 percent of students with undeclared majors were no longer enrolled after five years and completed fewer than 24 credits, compared with 38 and 36 percent of students in terminal-seeking and transfer-seeking majors.

Developmental Education

Developmental education students were less likely to complete or transfer by the end of the fifth year (23, 19, and 15 percent for students referred to one, two, and three subjects, respectively), compared with those who were not

referred (29 percent). However, consistent with research,[7] developmental education students were more likely to still be enrolled during the fifth year; the conjecture here is that it takes extra time for the persistent developmental education student to work through developmental coursework and then continue on to college-level coursework than it does for a student who can jump right into college-level coursework. If still

> *...given enough time, developmental students who make it into college-level coursework and coherent programs of study have success rates not significantly different than non-developmental students' outcomes and high portions of students completing credentials.*

enrolled, developmental students were more likely to accumulate over 25 credits by the end of the fifth year when compared with non-developmental students. Developmental students, if not enrolled, were more likely to have accumulated over 25 credits than were non-developmental

[7] Jenkins, D. & Weiss, M. J.

students, but also more likely to leave the institution without completing a single credit.

Noteworthy from research is the fact that if given enough time, developmental students who make it into college-level coursework and coherent programs of study have success rates not significantly different than non-developmental students' outcomes and high portions of students completing credentials.[8] As many developmental students may be first generation students, the key here is to ensure that the student is provided with the necessary guidance to ensure he or she understands and is enrolling in courses in a specific credential pathway.

What Does it Mean?

Positive academic outcomes—completion and transfer rates—differed between student groups. Students who did not receive Pell Grants had higher rates than did recipients. Students who started college full-time and those with declared majors had higher success rates than did those who started part-time or did not have clearly defined educational objectives when they started college. Students who did not require developmental education had higher completion and transfer rates than their counterparts who required developmental education. These findings lead to several items colleges could undertake to help students succeed; completing these tasks could increase graduation and completion rates in the short run and help improve institutional practices that will increase outcomes in the long run:

- Find ways to encourage entering students to enroll full-time.

- Support students through developmental education as quickly as possible.

- Focus students quickly into a major field and pathway of study.

- Ensure students stay on a path to graduation and do not take unnecessary or extraneous classes.

- Determine the barriers Pell Grant recipients face and why they complete or transfer at lower rates then non-recipients.

Additionally, the group of students not completing, but accumulating large numbers of credits was significant: 20 percent of students were not enrolled during the fifth year yet earned 25 or more credits; 8 percent of students were still enrolled at the end of five years with 25 or more credits, and 4 percent had over 60 credits. Colleges should ensure that such students are focused into coherent pathways of study so that they can complete. Identifying students who accumulate credits and do not complete or leave the institution may reveal programs and practices that can be implemented to encourage them to persist to completion. Colleges can start with the following questions:

- Which student groups accumulate large numbers of credits but do not go on to receive credentials? Can we provide the assistance needed to nudge them over the finish line? What is the most cost-effective way to help these students?

- Does the college provide appropriate guidance and advising to students at different junctures in their progress to ensure that they are enrolled in a coherent pathway to graduation?

- How does the college identify educational pathways and monitor individual student progress on these pathways?

- What are the early indicators of students who are at risk of leaving with large numbers of credits accumulated, but no degree or certificate?

- If your college was successful in converting half the dropouts who left with more than 24 credits to a degree or successful transfer, how much would your completion and transfer rates improve?

- It might be worth contacting students who left your college with enough credits to qualify for credentials to determine what you can do to help them finish.

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

---

[8] Ibid.