



Question: What percent of community college students leave to attend a four-year institution and how many community college students attain a degree?

Response:

Forty-six percent of all U.S. undergraduates, according to the Association of American Community Colleges (2007), attend community colleges (public 2-year institutions), and public community colleges account for over half of total undergraduate enrollment in Texas (Wellman, 2002). Preparing students to transfer to a four-year college remains a central role of community colleges. An examination of transfer rates reveals a considerable degree of variation in the ways in which transfer rates are calculated (Bradburn and Hurst, 2001). In general, transfer rates are calculated by the number of students who transfer to a four-year college divided by the number of potential transfer students. However, the numerator and especially the denominator can be defined in a number of different ways, each having a significant impact on the transfer estimate. For example, Cohen (1991) defined the transfer rate as students who enter a two-year college with no prior experience and complete 12 credit hours, divided into the number of that group who take one or more courses at an in-state public university within four years.

The following transfer rates have been reported according to different sources:

- Using Cohen's definition, Palmer (2000) found in a thirteen-state sample a 22% transfer rate, with a range of 11% to 40%.
- Using a similar definition of 10 credit hours completed and transferring to a 4-year university, Adelman (1999) found a 26% transfer rate with a national sample.

The demand for postsecondary education in Texas continues to increase at an annual rate of around 1.5%, with slightly higher growth in the community colleges and technical institutions (Wellman, 2002). Using Cohen's transfer rate methodology, about 29% of first-time community college students in Texas transferred to or graduated from a public four-year institution after six years. Of first-time community college students, 11% obtained the bachelor's degree after six years, and 18% had transferred to a four-year institution but had not yet completed the bachelor's degree.

Austin Community College compared to state and national data

Austin Community College (ACC) identified their six-year transfer rate as students who were first-time, full-time students who entered in Fall 2000, attempted 30 credit hours, and transferred to a Texas university within six years. Their transfer rate, according to this definition, was 17.8%, a number slightly smaller than the national rate of about 22% – 26%, and about 11 percentage points less than the reported Texas transfer rate. This could be due to ACC's definition requiring 30 hours attempted rather than 10 or 12 credit hours. The Austin Chamber of Commerce (2007) also reported in their 2007 Progress Report that ACC graduates 5% of their credit-seeking students within four years of admission and for 2006, had a 33.6% graduation rate within six years, which included earning an associate's degree from ACC or a bachelor's degree from a university. What was not clear was whether this graduation rate was of the total student population or the transfer student sample. This is near the high end of the range reported nationwide of about 17% to 43% for graduation of transfer students within five years, depending on whether or not an associate's degree was completed en route to a bachelor's degree. The ACC graduation rate (according to a combined associate's and bachelor's degree

attainment) is much higher than the reported 11% for Texas transfer students who had obtained a bachelor's degree within six years.

The proportion of students attending community colleges for various purposes affects transfer rates. Students report attending a two-year college for job skills, intellectual development, trade certifications, to obtain an associate's degree, or to transfer to a four-year college. According to the US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2007), at least one-quarter of students at community colleges have a goal to transfer to a four-year institution. In a study of 300 community colleges and 100,000 students, data were collected in the fall of 1999 and 2000 (VanDerLinden, 2002). Of these students, 21% were attending the community college for the sole purpose of transferring to a four-year college, while 25% were attending for intellectual development and the possibility of transferring to a four-year institution.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a longitudinal study on beginning postsecondary students (BPS), using a nationally representative sample of students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time between July 1, 1989 and June 30, 1990. Using these data, Bradburn and Hurst (2001) define the transfer rate as initial enrollment at a community college followed by subsequent enrollment at any 4-year institution (public, private) within the five-year study period without concurrent community college enrollment. Their findings, which suggest that one quarter of all first-time community college students eventually transfer to a 4-year institution, are outlined in the following table.

Transfer Rates and Expected Bachelor's Degree Completion of Community College Students

Community College Student Group	% First-Time Community College Enrollments	% Who Transferred to a 4-year College within 5 Years
All first-time community college students	100	25
First-time community college students that expect to complete a bachelor's degree	71	36

Source: Bradburn and Hurst (2001).

What influences the likelihood of earning a degree by students who transfer?

According to the US Department of Education's (2005) community college facts, 23% of those beginning community college in 1989-90 transferred to a four-year institution (similar to the findings of the NCES BPS). Of those who transferred to a four-year institution, 38% completed an associate degree before transferring. Another nationwide statistic reported that among students who began at a two-year institution, about half transferred to a four-year institution. Similar to statistics reported in the USDE community college facts, about a third of these transfer students earned the associate degree prior to transfer.

The bachelor's degree attainment rate was higher for those who had obtained an associate degree prior to transfer: 43% within five years, compared with 17% for those who transferred without the associate degree credential. Adelman (1999) reported 18% of students who transferred to a four-year college graduated with a bachelor's degree. Full-time students in a two-year institution also were more likely to transfer to a four-year college. Half of the two-year students who enrolled full-time during their first year in college subsequently transferred to a four-year institution, but only a fourth of students who enrolled part-time did so.

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