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Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data

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 is the group of credential-seeking students that attended Achieving the Dream institutions for the first time in fall 2002. This cohort will be tracked until 2008.

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.

Institutional Size Differences at Achieving the Dream Colleges

Achieving the Dream colleges share a number of characteristics: a commitment to improving outcomes for all students, particularly low-income students and students of color; a commitment to implementing lasting institutionwide change that helps more students earn certificates, earn degrees and transfer to four-year institutions; and a commitment to measuring student outcomes and tracking the college's progress toward its goals. These colleges also are open-access institutions that enroll large portions of Pell Grant recipients and/or students of color.

The colleges differ, however, in terms of size, location (region, population density, local economic and employment opportunities), and other aspects that influence student characteristics, student needs and institutional mission.

While the use of initiativewide measures is imperative to track and analyze student outcomes, institutional differences can dramatically influence initiativewide measures. For this reason, initiativewide measures may not always provide a meaningful comparison for all colleges. Consider, for example, student demographics. Some colleges serve large percentages of Native American students, and others have a majority of Hispanic students. These differences should be considered when colleges compare their outcomes to other colleges' outcomes or to initiativewide statistics.

College Size

The biggest obstacle to comparing individual colleges' outcomes with initiativewide statistics stems from the considerable size differences among the colleges. (Size is measured by the number of students in a college's 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort.) The smallest Achieving the Dream participant reported 190 students in its 2002 cohort, while the largest had 11,744. (See Figure 1 for the distribution of Achieving the Dream colleges by cohort size.) Due to the large variance in college sizes, a few large Achieving the Dream colleges can influence initiativewide summary statistics and obscure smaller colleges' results.

To explore the extent of the differing institutional sizes, the Achieving the Dream colleges were divided into three groups based on the sizes of their 2002 fall cohorts: small (fewer than 1,000 students), medium (1,000 to 2,999 students), and large (3,000 or more students). Figure 2 displays the number of colleges and students in each of these size categories. Seventeen of the 35 colleges are small, comprising nearly half (48 percent) of the colleges; however, these same colleges account for only 11 percent of the fall 2002 cohort. Conversely, the large group includes only 10 colleges (29 percent) but 68 percent of the students.

Differences in Race/Ethnicity

Although most colleges participating in the initiative have high proportions of students of color, the distribution of students by race/ethnicity differs by college size. Figure 3 displays the distributional differences in student race/ethnicity by college size. The initiative's small colleges have a larger portion of white students than do its medium and large colleges, but small colleges also enroll a larger share of Native American

Figure 1. Distribution of Achieving the Dream colleges by 2002 cohort size

Number of institutions by cohort size
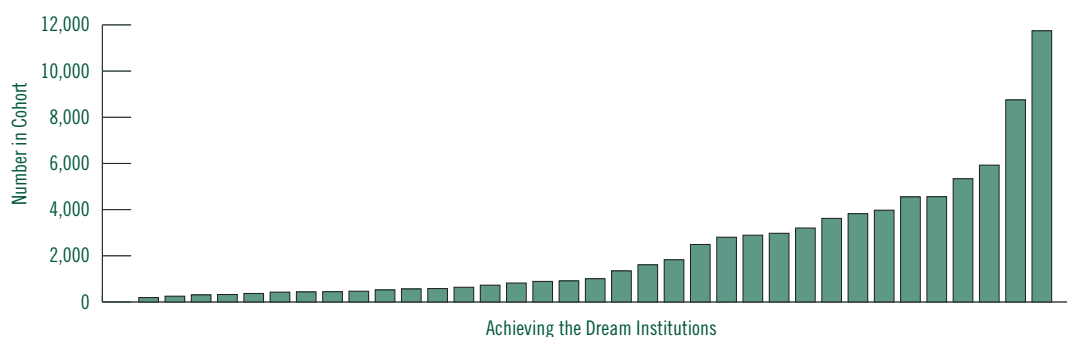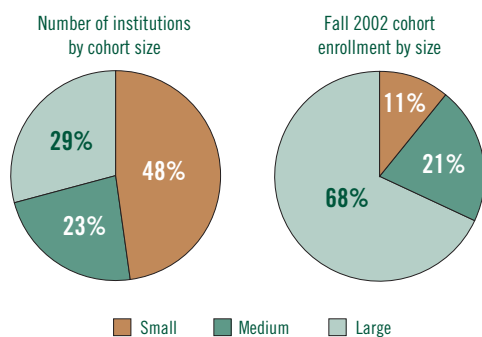
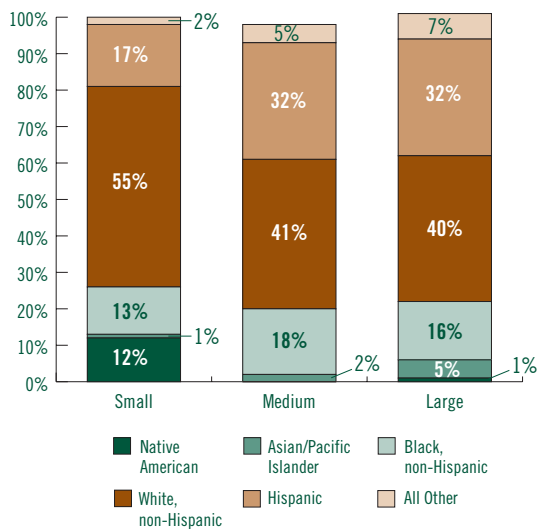Fall 2002 cohort enrollment by size

Small · Medium · Large

Nearly half of Achieving the Dream colleges are classified as small, but these colleges account for only 11 percent of students in the fall 2002 cohort. Only 29 percent of colleges are classified as large, but they account for 68 percent of students.

students and a smaller share of Hispanic students. While participating large colleges enroll large numbers and shares of students of color, their distribution of students by race/ethnicity is more even.

These differences may be attributed to the fact that larger colleges draw from large urban areas with diverse communities that are reflected in their enrollment, while smaller colleges are more likely to draw from rural areas or less diverse communities — communities often composed largely of one race/ethnicity. If this is the case, dividing the colleges into groups based on size does not necessarily eliminate distributional differences in race/ethnicity within each group. For example, 81 percent of one small college's 2002 cohort is Native American, while nearly two-thirds of another small college's 2002 cohort is Hispanic. These distributional differences may be attributed to the fact that the initiative seeks institutions with large portions of students of color, and they may not generalize to colleges nationally.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort by race/ethnicity and cohort size

Native American · Asian/Pacific Islander · Black, non-Hispanic · White, non-Hispanic · Hispanic · All Other
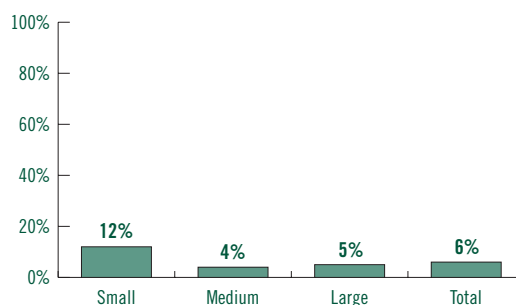
Note: Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 percent.

Outcome Measures

When outcomes differ by institutional size, the initiativewide results can be skewed by a few large colleges. For example, Figure 4 displays the percentage of black students in the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort that completed credentials by the end of the third year. Twelve percent of black students in small colleges completed their credentials compared with 4 percent and 5 percent in medium and large colleges, respectively. However, the initiativewide statistic (total) for the percentage of all black students completing their credentials is 6 percent. This example shows how the initiativewide measures can be slanted toward findings of the large institutions, and does not, at first glance, depict the outcomes, in this case the successes, of small colleges.

Figure 4. Percentage of black students in the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort completing credentials by the end of the third year

What Does this Mean?

Achieving the Dream colleges were chosen for the initiative because they enroll large proportions of Pell Grant recipients and/or students of color. While these colleges differ in terms of size, locale and student demographics, they face the same challenges of educating students who face academic, personal and financial challenges. More important, they share a commitment to improving student outcomes. For these reasons, measuring the progress of students at participating colleges through the use of initiativewide measures and statistics is both important and useful.

However, it is important to view initiativewide data in context — and with the understanding that differences among the colleges, in particular college size, influence these initiativewide analyses. Every Achieving the Dream college should keep differences in institutional and student characteristics in mind when comparing its own data with initiativewide statistics. While comparisons, particularly those among like groups, can be informative, a college should use its own history — and its own goals — as the primary yardstick of progress. Each college's success ultimately is measured by how well it meets the needs of its students and helps them attain their educational goals. ∎