

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.

Students Earning Zero Credits

Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of students in community colleges leave school during the first year of enrollment for reasons other than transfer or credential completion. Generally, non-traditional community college students—those 24 and older, independent, part-time, working, married, or who delayed enrollment—drop out within their first year at higher rates than do traditional students. Students cite many reasons for not re-enrolling: Needing to work, financial issues, conflicts at home or work, personal problems, not being satisfied with their educational experience, academic problems, and change in family status.¹

Researchers at Prince George's Community College conducted a study to determine predictors for dropping out. They found the strongest predictors to be: The amount of developmental coursework required; English proficiency; delayed college entry; not having specific educational goals; being Mexican-American; and financial reasons.²

Achieving the Dream colleges, along with many community and open-access colleges, enroll large numbers of students at risk of dropping or stopping out. This analysis identifies the characteristics of Achieving the Dream students who enroll but do not earn any credits during the first term; these students are at risk of dropping or stopping out. This is a loss to the student who has gone through the enrollment process, paid fees, and has nothing to show for the effort.

The analysis focuses on students who obtain zero credits during the first term and their persistence to the second term. These students were compared to those who earned credits during the first term.³

Who Doesn't Earn Credits?

Overall, 14 percent of Achieving the Dream students did not earn credits during their first term (Figure 1). Some differences existed between racial/ethnic groups. Black students had the largest portion of zero-credit earners during their first term—18 percent. At 12 percent, white students had the smallest portion of zero-credit-earning students among the different racial/ethnic groups. Other racial/ethnic groups had percentages of zero-credit earning students that were not significantly different: 14 percent for Native Americans and 15 percent for both Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics.

Being male, enrolling part-time and being between the ages of 20 and 24 were all associated with earning zero credits during the first term. Fifteen percent of male students earned zero credits, compared with 12 percent of female students. Also, 16 percent of the students aged 20 to 24 earned zero credits, compared with 12 percent of those under 20. Fourteen percent of those over 24 years old earned zero credits, placing them between the other two age groups. Consistent with the fact that part-time students are typically less successful than full-time students, 17 percent of students initially enrolling part-time were zero-credit earners, compared with 9 percent of those who enrolled full-time.

Students referred to developmental education were more likely to earn zero credits than those who were not referred: Fifteen percent of students referred to developmental education earned zero credits, compared with 12 percent of those who were not referred. This could be due to the fact that students referred to developmental education are, by definition, less academically prepared and may have a harder time earning credits during their first term.

The percentage of students earning zero credits during the first term did not vary significantly by Pell receipt or type of major (terminal award, transfer-seeking, undeclared).

¹ Bradburn, E. M. & Carroll, C. D. (2002, November). *Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996–98*. (NCES Report No. 2003-153). Retrieved May 19, 2008, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003153.pdf>

² Note: The listed predictors are not in any particular order. Hawley, T. H., & Harris, T. A. (2005). "Student characteristics related to persistence for first-year community college students." *Journal of College Student Retention*, 7, pp. 117-142.

³ All Achieving the Dream participating colleges were included in this analysis. Students data from each round's first and second baseline years were used: Cohorts 2002 and 2003 were used for Round 1; 2003 and 2004 for Round 2; 2004 and 2005 for Round 3; and 2005 and 2006 for Round 4.

Figure 1. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students earning zero credits during the first term, and percentage of zero-credit earners persisting to the second term, by selected characteristics

	Percent of students earning zero credits	Percent of zero-credit earners persisting to the second term
TOTAL	14	15
RACE/ETHNICITY		
Native American	15	12
Asian/Pacific Islander	14	16
Black, non-Hispanic	18	16
White, non-Hispanic	12	14
Hispanic	15	15
Other*	15	20
PELL STATUS, FIRST TERM		
Did not receive Pell Grants	14	13
Received Pell Grants	13	19
GENDER		
Female	12	16
Male	15	14
AGE		
Under 20	12	17
20-24	16	14
25 and over	14	13
DEVELOPMENTAL REFERRAL STATUS		
Not referred	12	13
Any referral	15	16
ATTENDANCE STATUS DURING THE FIRST TERM		
Part-time	17	14
Full-time	9	16
TYPE OF MAJOR, 2-YEAR INSTITUTIONS		
Terminal major	14	14
Transfer seeking	13	16
Undeclared	14	13

*Includes: Non-resident alien, more than one, other

Persistence for Credit and Zero-Credit Earners

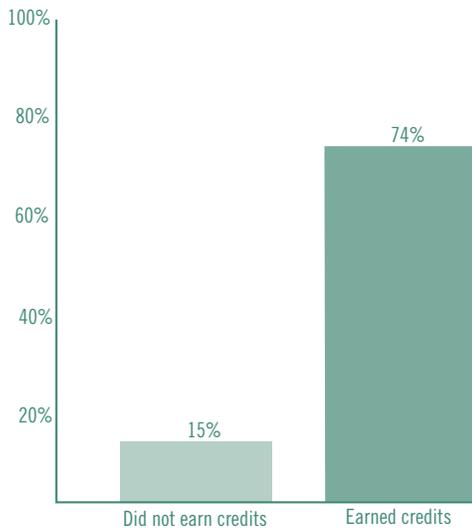
Figure 2 displays the differential in second-term persistence between zero-credit earners and students who earned credits during the first term. Only 15 percent of the students who did not earn any credits during their first term persisted to the second term, compared with 74 percent of credit earners. Obviously, earning zero credits during the first term is highly associated with the chance that a student will not persist to the next semester. Thus, early identification of the characteristics of students in this group may help colleges anticipate early drop-outs and stop-outs, and develop programs to provide the necessary help early enough to sustain these students through their first semester.

Persistence of Zero-Credit Earners

Along with the percentage of students who were zero-credit earners, Figure 1 displays the percentage of zero-credit earners persisting to the second term. The findings indicate variation in second-term persistence for zero-credit earners depending on certain student characteristics. Slight variability was found by race/ethnicity, with Native American zero-credit earners (12 percent) slightly less likely to persist than students of other racial/ethnic groups.

Interestingly, the results indicate that zero-credit earners who received Pell grants were more likely to persist to the second term than those who did not receive Pell grants—19 compared with 13 percent. This could be due to Pell grant receipt providing a sense of security for students. If a student did not earn credits and did not receive a

Figure 2. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students persisting to the second term, by credit-earning status in the first term



Pell grant, he or she may not feel comfortable taking on the financial burden of another term; however, the financial burden may be eased for a zero-credit earner who did receive a Pell grant, and he or she may be more likely to persevere to a second term.

Also noteworthy is the finding that 16 percent of zero-credit earners who were referred to developmental education enrolled in the second semester, compared with 13 percent of those who were not referred. Students referred to developmental education may have enrolled and made some progress toward fulfilling their developmental needs during the first term. So, although they may not have earned credential-bearing credits, they were motivated by progress toward completion of their developmental work—motivation that was unavailable to those who were not referred.

Sixteen percent of both female and transfer-seeking zero-credit earners persisted, compared with 14 percent of both males and those in terminal majors. Also, as expected, traditional students (those under 20 years of age or attending on a full-time basis) who were zero-credit earners were more likely to re-enroll than older or part-time students.

What Does it Mean?

This analysis revealed a set of characteristics having strong associations with earning zero credits during the first term: Being male, black, between 20 and 24, needing developmental education, or starting part-time, which was the strongest of these relationships. If a student did not earn credits, another set of characteristics was related to a greater likelihood of not persisting to the second term. The strongest relationships were being Native American, male, over 20 years old, attending part-time, or being enrolled in a terminal program.

These results do not explain why students leave college, but they do help identify populations more likely to leave college early. And as this analysis reveals, helping students succeed during the first term increases the chances that they will re-enroll. Early intervention appears to be a critical component of improving the chances of success for high-risk students. Identifying the characteristics associated with early departure can help colleges target strategies to limit the early loss of students. Since students have different experiences, individual colleges may find different patterns in student characteristics associated with earning zero credits and not persisting to the second term. To begin, colleges should ask the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of students with unsuccessful outcomes in the first term?
- Why do these students drop or stop out? Perhaps the student perceives a possibility elsewhere as being more attractive, such as the military or employment.
- What strategies do we have in place to help these students as soon as they arrive on campus? And what strategies can we develop?

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 and Amy Topper, JBL Associates, Inc. and edited and designed by Rachel Goodwin.

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 April 2008 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.