

## 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.

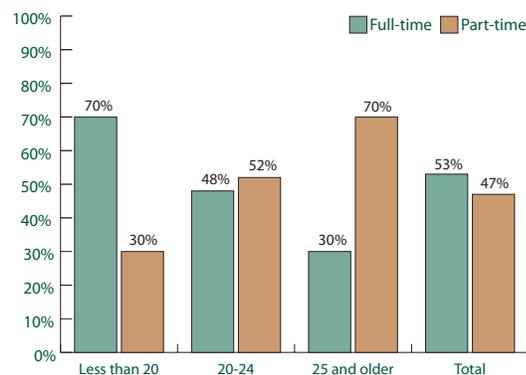
## Outcome Differences Across Age Groups

The average age of students in the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort was 23.8 years. Overall, 28 percent of Achieving the Dream students were 25 years old and older.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that nontraditional, or older, students tend to earn higher grades than traditional students; however, they have higher attrition rates.<sup>2</sup> Older students often have children or must work in order to finance their education, thus encountering more obstacles on the road to credential completion than younger, traditional students. Although age is not necessarily associated with non-completion, certain risk factors come along with age that do increase students' chances of non-completion. Risk factors commonly associated with being an older student include: Part-time enrollment, delayed entry into college, not having a regular high school diploma, having children, being a single parent, being financially independent of parents, and working full-time while enrolled.<sup>3,4</sup>

This report investigates college enrollment and persistence by age among Achieving the Dream students. The data were disaggregated by age, and differences in enrollment patterns and persistence that are associated with age

were analyzed. For this analysis, students were disaggregated into three age groups: Students under 20; students 20 to 24; and students 25 and older.

**Figure 1.** Percentage distribution of the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort, by attendance status during the first term and age



## Attendance Status

Figure 1 displays the distribution of students by age and attendance status. Overall, 47 percent of the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort enrolled on a part-time basis during the first term. Fifty-

*(continued on next page)*

**Figure 2.** Percentage of the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort referred to developmental education, by subject and age

	Math referral	English referral	Reading referral	Any referral
Less than 20	65	39	43	73
20 - 24	55	31	30	60
25 and older	48	25	22	50
Total	57	33	34	63

<sup>1</sup>Based on students entering 55 Achieving the Dream colleges in fall 2003.

<sup>2</sup>Donohue, T. L. and Wong, E. H. "Achievement motivation and college satisfaction in traditional and nontraditional students," Education. Winter 1997. Available: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3673/is\\_199701/ai\\_n8754065/pg\\_2](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_199701/ai_n8754065/pg_2).

<sup>3</sup>American Federation of Teachers. Student Persistence in College: More than Counting Caps and Gowns. Washington, DC. August 2003. Available: [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/higher\\_ed/student\\_persistence.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/higher_ed/student_persistence.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Interestingly, recent research indicated that when controlling for mathematics ability, older students were more likely to complete their credentials than younger students. Calcagno, J.C., Crosta, P., Bailey, T., & Jenkins, D. "Does Age of Entrance Affect Community College Completion Probabilities? Evidence From a Discrete-time Hazard Model," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol 29, No. 3. pp. 218-235. September 2007.

<sup>5</sup>For purposes of this analysis, persistors are those who re-enrolled at any time during the year, completed, or transferred.

## 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, 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 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.

three percent enrolled on a full-time basis. As expected, differences existed in the attendance status of students depending on the students' age. Seventy percent of students 25 years and older enrolled part-time, compared with 52 percent of those age 20-24. Thirty percent of those under 20 enrolled part-time.

## Developmental Needs

Overall, 63 percent of students were referred to one or more developmental education subjects. However, older students were less likely than younger students to be referred to developmental education. As displayed in Figure 2, 50 percent of students age 25 and older were referred to any type of developmental education compared with 60 percent of students age 20-24 and 73 percent of those under 20.

Differences in developmental needs between older and younger students also existed for each of the three subject areas. Forty-eight percent of students age 25 and older were referred to developmental math, compared with 55 percent of those aged 20-24 and 65 percent of those under 20. And the pattern continued for reading and English, respectively, where 22 and 25 percent of students 25 and older were referred, compared with 43 and 39 percent of those less than 20 years old.

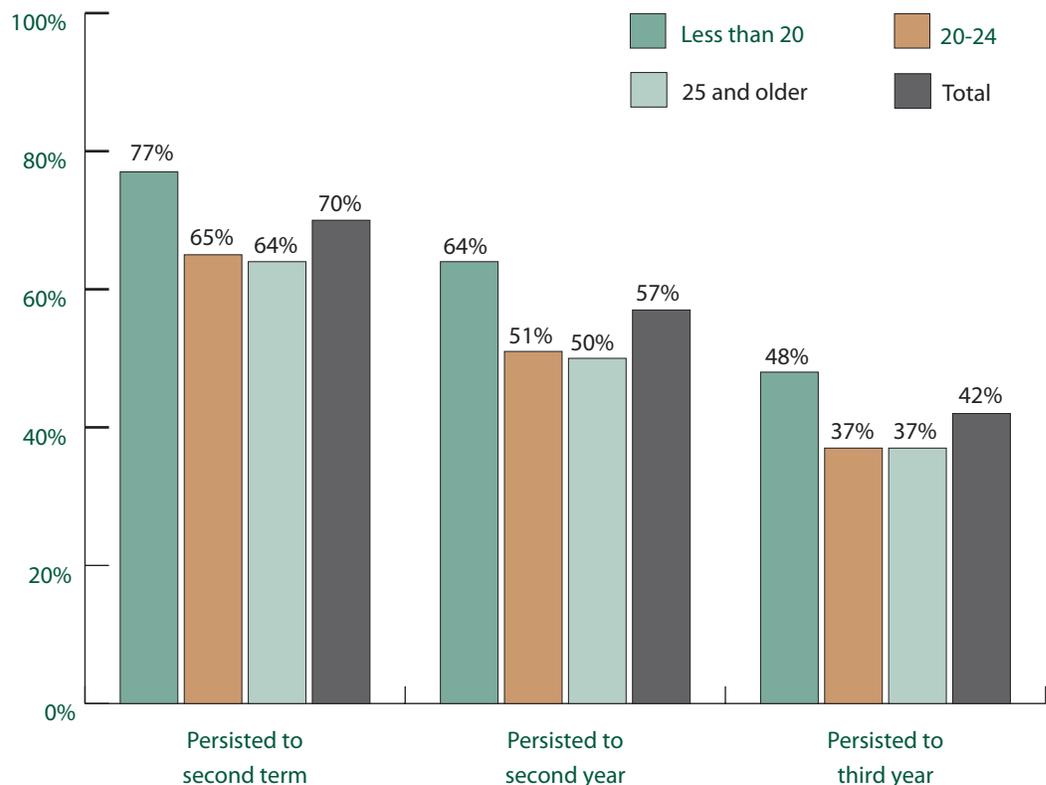
## Persistence

Consistent with research, persistence rates differed by age, with older students less likely to persist than younger students. Sixty-four percent of students 25 years and older persisted to the second term, compared with 77 percent of those less than 20 years old (Figure 3). Further, younger students were more likely to persist to the second and third years than older students. Fifty percent of students 25 years and older persisted to the second year and 37 percent to the third year, compared with 64 and 48 percent of students less than 20 years old.<sup>5</sup>

## GPA and Credits Earned

As Figure 4 indicates, of students who persisted, those 25 years and older accumulated more credential-bearing credits, completed higher percentages of credits attempted, and had slightly higher grade point averages (GPAs) than students less than 20 years old and students 20 to 24 years old. Students 25 years or older accumulated an average of 55 credits over three years, compared to the average of 50 credits accumulated by students less than 20 years old. Students 25 years or older completed 80 percent of the credits they attempted, compared with 74 percent for students less than 20. Further, the average GPA for students 25 years and older was four-tenths of a point higher than that for students less than 20, 2.88 compared to 2.47.

**Figure 3.** Percentage of the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort persisting to the second term, second year and third year, by age



\*Persistors are those who re-enrolled at any time during the year, completed or transferred.

**Figure 4.** Average GPA, number of credits accumulated and percentage of credits completed by the end of the third year for students enrolled full time during the first term for the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort,\* by age

	GPA	Credits accumulated	Percentage of credits completed
Less than 20	2.47	50	74%
20 - 24	2.55	48	72%
25 and older	2.88	55	80%
Total	2.53	50	74%

\*For those students who persisted to the third year.

## What Does This Mean?

The trends revealed for Achieving the Dream students in terms of students' age differences were consistent with those described in the previous research: Older students tended to achieve higher grades and perform better academically than younger students, yet they did not persist at the same rate. Not only did older Achieving the Dream students perform better academically than younger students, they were also less likely to be referred to developmental education. Older students may need more help than younger students with non-academic risk factors such as balancing work with part-time enrollment, having predictable child care, and managing family schedules.

It may be worth examining options for separate intervention strategies designed specifically for older students, as their needs are often different from those of younger students. While the needs of younger students revolve more around academic issues, it is worth noting that older students' needs—especially those associated with the risk factors indicated by the research—are mostly financial in nature. Achieving the Dream institutions may want to investigate the following questions on their respective campuses:

- Is age related to persistence and other measures of student success at our institution?
- Do early warning signs of impending dropouts differ for older and younger students? What are those warning signs?
- What programs does our institution have in place that target students from different age groups? For example, do we have the proper facilities available for disseminating financial aid information? Can we provide child care for our students or refer them to an affordable child care facility? Do we offer classes at convenient times for students who have to work?

## Achieving the Dream's Database

Achieving the Dream colleges can use the Achieving the Dream database created by JBL Associates, Inc., to replicate the analysis presented here for their own institutions. This analysis might help colleges identify areas of their curricula or groups of students needing special attention. ■

*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, JBL Associates, Inc., and edited and designed by Richard Hart and Mary Lee, MDC, Inc.

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).

This report uses the September 2007 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Colleges are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.