

## 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.

## Different Paths for Different Majors

Some community college students seek specific education or training that can be completed at their community college. This course of study, which can result in a certificate or an associate degree, usually is preparation or additional training for a specific occupation. Students who fit this description enroll in *terminal-major* programs and are described as such in this analysis. Other students begin their education with the goal of transferring to a four-year college to finish bachelor's degrees. Still others are not sure of their goals or are undeclared. In this analysis, these students are described as *transfer seeking* and *undeclared*, respectively.

What drives some students to seek terminal degrees while others enroll intending to transfer to other institutions? In the April 15, 2005, issue of *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Thomas Bailey and Davis Jenkins note that lower-income students might need jobs at an earlier age than middle-class students.<sup>1</sup> Earning a terminal degree at a community college may be a faster way to secure a job than enrolling with the intention to transfer to another institution. Further, Bailey and Jenkins note that some first-generation college students may not believe that they can complete bachelor's or other degrees beyond those offered by community colleges. Or, at the community colleges, some students simply may be more engaged by applied occupational instruction than by a more abstract academic education.

The different educational paths (terminal majors versus transfer seeking) represent students with different objectives and likely different needs, both of which may be related to persistence. Understanding these differences is critical for community colleges working to improve student outcomes.

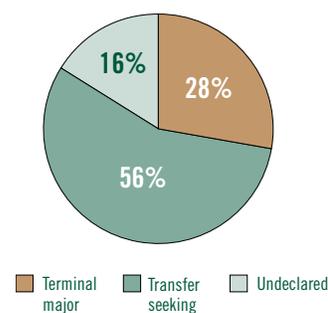
The following analysis compares terminal-major and transfer-seeking students. Thirty-five of the 58 Achieving the Dream institutions have participated in the initiative long enough to provide cohort data for three academic years. Of these 35 colleges, 13 were able to provide data

on their 2002 cohort students who transferred at some point. This analysis was conducted on data reported by these 13 colleges, which represent one-third of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort, or approximately 27,000 students. The following states are represented in this sample: Connecticut, Florida, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas and Virginia.

## Differences between Terminal-Major and Transfer-Seeking Students

The sample of the 2002 cohort that was analyzed for this discussion began with slightly more than one-fourth of students enrolled in terminal-major programs during their first term.<sup>2</sup> More than half of the 2002 cohort were enrolled in transfer-seeking programs, and the remaining 16 percent had not declared majors upon their first enrollment (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort by major field type\*



\*Based on 13 Achieving the Dream colleges; the distribution of students by major field type in the entire 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort is 34 percent, terminal major; 52 percent, transfer seeking; and 14 percent, undeclared.

Students may change from terminal- to transfer-seeking majors throughout their academic careers.

## Age

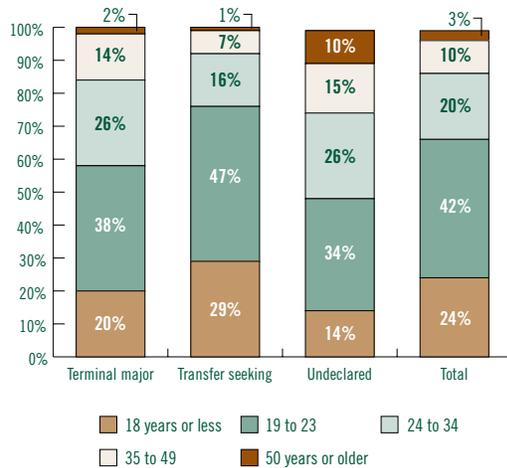
The characteristics of transfer-seeking and terminal-major students differ. The major difference is in the age of the students. As shown in Figure 2, terminal-major students and those

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<sup>1</sup>Bailey, T., and Jenkins, D., "Building a Pathway for Occupational Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, Volume 51, Issue 32, p. B20.

<sup>2</sup>Students may change from terminal- to transfer-seeking majors throughout their academic careers.

**Figure 2.** Percentage distribution of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort by age and major field type



*Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 percent.*

who were undeclared were older than those who were transfer seeking: 24 percent of those in transfer-seeking programs were at least 24 years old, compared with 42 percent of terminal-major students and 51 percent of students with undeclared major fields.

### Gender

The difference in enrollment between males and females in the three curricular paths was too small to be significant. Females comprised 60 percent of the terminal-major students, 58 percent of transfer-seeking students and 59 percent of those with undeclared major fields.

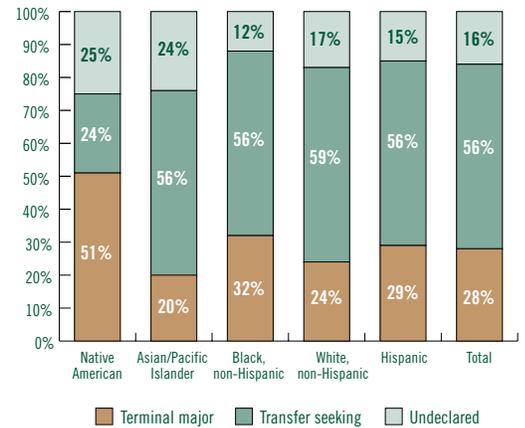
### Race/ethnicity

In terms of race/ethnicity, Native American students were more likely than students in other groups to enroll in terminal-major programs: 51 percent of Native American students enrolled in terminal-major programs, compared with an average of 28 percent of all students. Further, white students were slightly more likely to enroll in transfer-seeking programs than the average (59 compared with 56 percent), while black and Hispanic students were as likely to enroll in transfer-seeking programs as the average of all students (Figure 3).

### Enrollment status

Terminal-major students were slightly more likely to enroll on a part-time basis during their first term: 60 percent of terminal-major students enrolled part-time during their first term, compared with 53 percent of transfer-seeking students. Seventy percent of the students with undeclared majors enrolled on a part-time basis (Figure 4).

**Figure 3.** Percentage distribution of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort by race/ethnicity and major field type

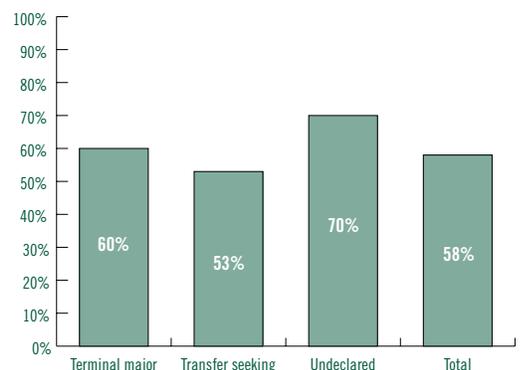


### Pell Grant receipt

Because Achieving the Dream does not collect family income data, the initiative uses Pell Grant receipt as a proxy for low-income status. Using this proxy, terminal-major students were more likely to have financial need than were transfer-seeking students, but the difference was relatively small: 38 percent of terminal-major students received Pell Grants during their first term, compared with 31 percent of transfer-seeking students. Only 12 percent of students with undeclared major fields received Pell Grants (Figure 5). This could be due in part to the fact that they were more likely to enroll on a part-time basis. (Students who are enrolled less than half-time are not eligible for Pell Grants.)

In sum, age was the most obvious factor that differentiated students in the different tracks. The two other measures that showed noteworthy differences, receiving a Pell Grant and attending part-time, suggest that terminal-major students may be at greater risk of dropping out than transfer-seeking students.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort enrolled part-time during their first term, by major field type



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After three years, 56 percent of the students analyzed left college with no degree and did not transfer. The loss rate was 59 percent for terminal-major students and 66 percent for undeclared students, compared with 52 percent for transfer-seeking students (Figure 6).

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Based on the data analyzed here, the higher loss rate for terminal-major students may be attributed to two facts. First, terminal-major students were older, on average, than transfer-seeking students. Second, they were more likely to receive Pell Grants, which suggests greater financial need.

The group that bears the closest review is undeclared students. These students were more likely to enroll part-time and more likely to leave college than others. They may have enrolled for reasons other than seeking terminal degrees. It may be that not having an educational goal indicates someone who may need help in evaluating his or her abilities and interests and matching them with possible majors.

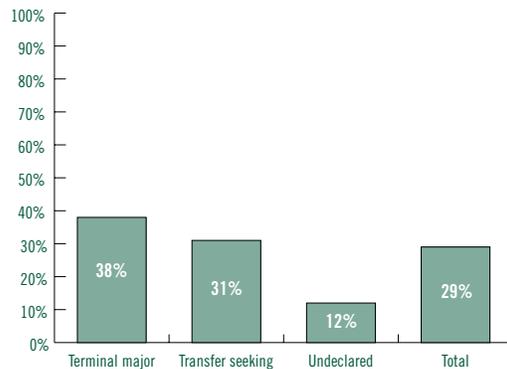
## What Does This Mean?

Achieving the Dream colleges are dedicated to helping their students succeed. Persistence and employment outcomes are two critical measures of success. An obvious question is whether the differences in student outcomes between terminal-major and transfer-seeking students can be ascribed to student characteristics or the possibility that terminal-major students can move into good jobs without completing their programs. Asking these questions might aid community colleges in creating meaningful intervention strategies to help improve the success of these students.

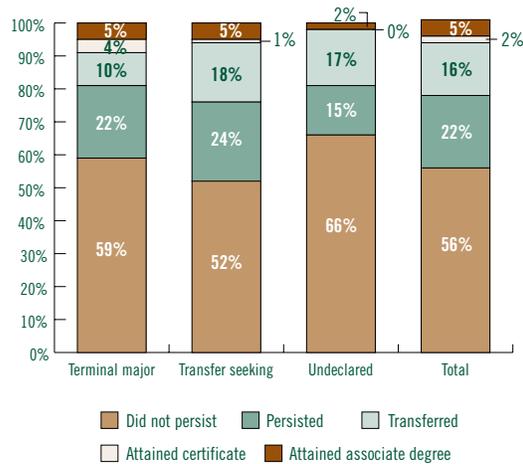
## Achieving the Dream’s Database

Achieving the Dream colleges can use the Achieving the Dream database created by JBL Associates 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. ■

**Figure 5.** Percentage of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort who received Pell Grants during their first term, by major field type



**Figure 6.** Percentage distribution of the 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort by persistence\* and completion status at the end of the third academic year, by major field type



\*Persistence is defined as enrolling during any term in the third academic year.

Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 percent.

*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.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative to help more community college students, particularly students of color and low-income learners, succeed. The initiative works on multiple fronts — including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement and public policy — and emphasizes the use of data to drive change. For more information, visit [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org).

This issue of *Data Notes* was written by John B. Lee, president, JBL Associates, Inc., and edited and designed by KSA-Plus Communications, 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 August 2006 version of the Achieving the Dream database.