

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.

Transfer Students

The U.S. Department of Education found that 71 percent of beginning community college students anticipated earning bachelor's degrees or higher, and 68 percent were enrolled in academic programs.¹ However, community college students progress along varied paths. Some students complete associate's degrees prior to transferring; others transfer prior to degree completion. Some students transfer to other community colleges, and others transfer to four-year colleges or universities. The transfer picture is confounded by the fact that some students take classes at another college—thus appearing to be transfer students—and then return to the original community college. The reverse case is also evident: A student can show up in the community college for a class or two while being enrolled fulltime at another institution, again appearing as a transfer student for the community college. Finally, students enrolled in career/technical majors² degree programs may transfer to other institutions as well. Without knowing how a student is integrating his or her community college enrollment with other college enrollment, it is difficult to calculate an accurate transfer rate or graduation rate.

Community colleges have difficulty tracking transfer students, and transfers are often missing from official student outcome measures, including graduation rates. The Achieving the Dream initiative works with community colleges to increase student transfer reporting capacity. Some colleges use state student tracking systems, while others use data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which tracks students enrolled in the majority of the country's accredited colleges and universities. About half of the Achieving the Dream colleges (48 out of 92) provided student transfer data on the initiative-wide database—annual cohort transfer rates ranged from zero to 42 percent for the 2002 through 2006 cohorts.³

This issue of *Data Notes* examines the reported transfer rates⁴ of Achieving the Dream colleges

and the enrollment patterns of students who transfer to another institution either before or after receiving degrees from the community colleges. Evidence suggests that data collected reflecting transfer rates have improved since 2002 student cohort data collection began for Achieving the Dream in 2004. While the reporting of student transfers continues to improve the data reported here should be viewed as approximate given the difficulties colleges encounter in tracking student transfers. This overview provides an estimate of the magnitude of the transfer rates reported. The relatively large share of community college students that transfer indicates the importance of understanding the enrollment patterns of transfer students, and of including transfers in institutional measures of student success.

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Transfer Rates

Figure 1 displays the average annual transfer rate for each cohort, and the total percentage of students reported as transfers by the end of the 2006–07 academic year. Nineteen percent of students in the 2002 cohort transferred during the five-year data collection period. Comparable percentages of students were reported as transfers for each academic year—ranging between three and five percent. There was an upward trend in the annual transfer rates for ensuing cohorts. However, it cannot be determined whether this was a true increase in the percentage of students transferring, whether better reporting occurred over the later data collection cycles, or whether new institutions being included over the initiative's duration affected the outcomes.

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¹ Bradburn, E., Hurst, D. & Peng, S. *Community College Transfer Rates to 4-year Institutions Using Alternative Definitions of Transfer* (NCES 2001–197). U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC: 2001. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001197.pdf>.

² “Career/technical majors” referred to herein were called “terminal majors” in previous issues of *Data Notes*.

³ Institutions were included in this analysis if they reported transfers at any point during the Achieving the Dream data collection effort. Several institutions included in the report show zero transfers for a cohort during a given academic year. This was deemed valid: A cohort may not have any students transferring out during one academic year while data for other years include transfer students. Three institutions reported a small number of students transferring (0.01 percent or less) and were excluded from the analysis. This was done because it is believed that these institutions were not informed of the true magnitude of their number of transferring students.

⁴ Herein, “transfers” refers to students who leave the Achieving the Dream institution and enroll in another institution. “Re-enrolling” students are those who have left the Achieving the Dream institution and return at a later date.

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.

Figure 1. Annual transfer rates for Achieving the Dream students, by cohort

Cohort	Percent transferred, year 1	Percent transferred, year 2	Percent transferred, year 3	Percent transferred, year 4	Percent transferred, year 5	Total percentage transferred, all years
2002	3.3%	4.0%	5.1%	3.3%	3.3%	19.0%
2003	4.5%	4.7%	4.2%	3.7%	†	17.0%
2004	4.3%	4.3%	4.6%	†	†	13.1%
2005	5.1%	4.4%	†	†	†	9.5%
2006	5.4%	†	†	†	†	5.4%

† Not applicable.

Note: Average percentages reported are the percentages of students.

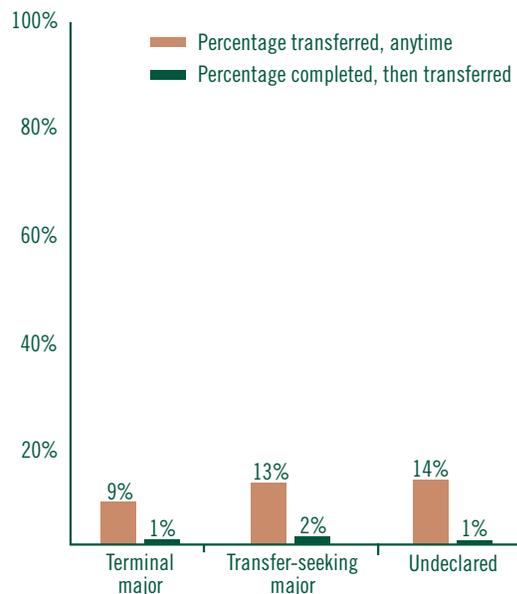
Transfer Rates by Major Field of Study

Community college students can complete training for specific occupations and earn either certificates or associate's degrees—these are terminal degrees. Other students begin their education with the goal of transferring to four-year colleges to finish bachelor's degrees; these students are described as transfer-seeking. Students in transfer-seeking programs are expected to have higher transfer rates than those in career/technical major fields.

Figure 2 displays the percentages of Achieving the Dream students who transferred—for all cohorts, during any academic year—by their major field of study reported during their first term. Students in transfer-seeking programs had a higher transfer rate—13 percent—than those in terminal-major programs—9 percent.

Figure 2 also displays, for students that completed credentials, the percentage of those who were reported as transferring after completion of their award. Of interest here is the relatively small portion of students who completed their credential and then transferred—1 to 2 percent of the original cohort.

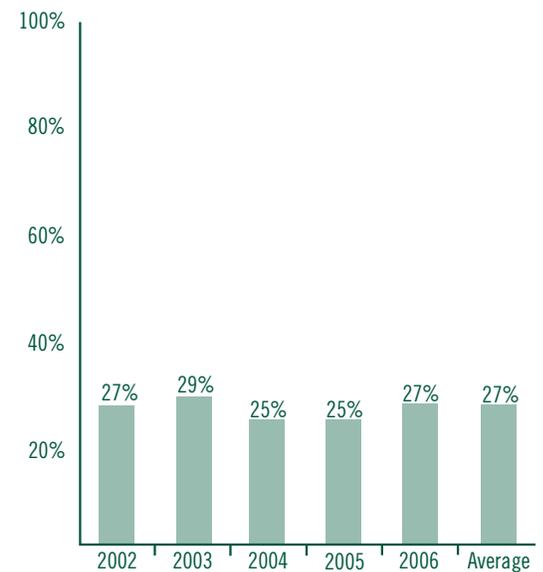
Figure 2. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students who transferred, by major area of study



Transfer Students Who Return

A finding that complicates interpretation of transfer rates is the fact that 27 percent of transfer students later re-enrolled in the community college (Figure 3). With only minor fluctuations, this re-enrollment rate persisted over all cohorts.

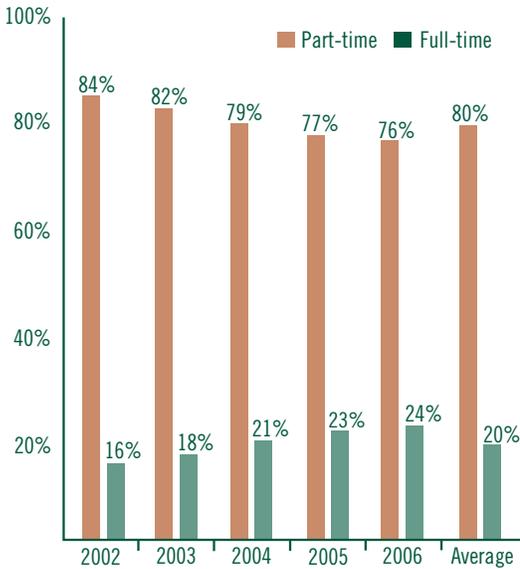
Figure 3. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students re-enrolling after reported transfer, by cohort



This relatively large portion of students re-enrolling at the reporting college indicates the necessity of identifying the goals of transfer students. Figure 4 displays the percentage distribution of students who re-enroll after a reported transfer, by their attendance status upon re-enrollment. Overall, only one-fifth (20 percent) of transfers attended on a full-time basis when they re-enrolled. Thus, the vast majority of students returned on a part-time basis.

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Figure 4. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students re-enrolling after reported transfer, by attendance status and cohort



What Does this Mean?

The 2002 Achieving the Dream cohort had a five-year completion rate of 15 percent. Coupled with the 19 percent transfer rate during the same five years, the result is a large share of students with potentially successful outcomes from the community college experience. Failing to account for students who transfer can understate colleges' outcomes.

Although this analysis reveals a large portion of students transferring, it also indicates that the goals and intentions of students who transfer are unknown. Further research is needed to reveal these students' full enrollment patterns and intentions; however, these findings could point to several potential scenarios:

- Students who may have gone to another institution to take a class or two and are seen as “transfers.”
- Considering the small portion of transfer students who completed credentials before transferring, some of these transfer students may be enrolled in a program elsewhere and have used the community college to pick up one or two classes.
- Students may be “swirling,” moving from institution to institution.
- A student may have left the community college to attend a four-year institution, felt he or she was not ready, and re-enrolled at the community college. This would be a “backward transfer.”

Colleges should find effective means of tracking students who transfer so they can fully document all types of student goals

and successes. Furthermore, considering the high transfer rates found in the studied colleges, it is imperative that colleges identify and support students who plan to transfer to other institutions, including those who do not necessarily intend to obtain degrees or certificates at the community college. With this in mind, it is important for colleges to consider the following questions:

- What is our transfer rate?
- How can we more effectively and accurately identify students who intend to and actually do transfer?
- Are our transfer students merely here from another institution to take a class or two, or are they at our institution to complete a program?
- What are the characteristics of our transfer students?
- Do certain groups of transfer-seeking students require different types of services?
- Does the curriculum required of transfer-seeking students appropriately articulate to the institutions to which they transfer?

Note: If your college is not registered to receive transfer data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), or you would like help in acquiring NSC services, please contact your college's Data Coordinator.

Data Coordinator Contacts

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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, edited by Will Sutton of Achieving the Dream at MDC, Inc. 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.

Note: 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.