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California Higher Education Accountability: Goal - Student Success Measure: Four-Year Degrees Conferred on Community College Transfer Students

This report provides a measurement of community college student success in completing a four-year degree program. It also discusses factors that influence students' time-to-degree.

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The Commission advises the Governor and Legislature on higher education policy and fiscal issues. Its primary focus is to ensure that the state's educational resources are used effectively to provide Californians with postsecondary education opportunities. More information about the Commission is available at www.cpec.ca.gov.

Background

In June 2006, the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) adopted an “Accountability Framework” for California public higher education. The framework includes seventeen measures of progress towards four broad goals: Student Preparation for College, Affordability and Access, Student Success in Progressing through College, and Public Benefits of Postsecondary Education. This report presents initial time-to-degree information for community college students who transfer to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU). It provides a baseline measurement and a starting point for regular measurements of transfer student time-to-degree.

Summary

This report focuses on the time it takes for community college transfer students to attain a degree at a UC or CSU. The data are based on fall 2000 transfer students. The percentage totals of time-to-degree shown below are additive (e.g., for CSU the 52% includes the 21.8% and 48.5% numbers that precede it):

For the 2000-01 group of transfer students into the CSU:

- 21.8% graduated within two years of transferring into the system.
- 48.5% graduated in fewer than three years of transferring.
- 52% graduated in three years of transferring.
- 70.5% graduated in fewer than five years of transferring.

In addition, during their CSU enrollment, an average of 25% of these students enrolled in a community college for at least one academic term after having transferred into the CSU.

For the 2000-01 group of transfer students into the UC:

- 44.2% graduated within two years of transferring into the UC.
- 73.1% graduated in fewer than three years of transferring.
- 78% graduated in three years of transferring.
- 86.5% graduated in fewer than five years of transferring.

Several factors likely influenced the time-to-degree of the CSU and UC cohorts of students, including student course-taking patterns. This is particularly true for the CSU cohort. A more detailed examination of the CSU student data indicate that, on average, CSU students who attempted full-time course loads (an average of greater than 12 units per semester) after transfer received their degrees within two to three years.

Why This Measure is Important

The 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education anticipated the seamless movement of community college students into the state's public and independent baccalaureate degree granting institutions as a means of providing access to those students who do not initially enter a university. The transfer function is an important component of access in California higher education: many students cannot afford the average annual cost of attendance at a CSU or UC campus, which is in excess of \$20,000. Every additional term of enrollment increases these costs and puts degree attainment at risk. Documenting the time it takes community college transfer students to graduate from the CSU and UC provides one perspective on how well the transfer function is working, in terms of cost and success.

Transfer students include:

- Students both academically and financially capable of entry into the CSU and UC directly out of high school;
- Students who initially lack the academic standing to enroll in a CSU or UC as freshmen but are later admitted to the CSU and UC based on their work in the community colleges;
- Students whose personal or financial circumstances precluded their immediate enrollment in a four-year postsecondary education system out of high school; and
- Adults who may have attained an educational degree of certificate earlier and later return to college to pursue another degree.

Each year approximately 70,000 students transfer from community colleges to the CSU, UC, and independent institutions in California. Approximately two-thirds of CSU students who receive a bachelor's degrees transferred from a community college. For UC, transfer students account for approximately one-third of baccalaureate degree recipients.

The timely movement of students through the postsecondary educational pipeline is important facet of the transfer function. An *effective* transfer pipeline enables larger numbers of students to utilize the postsecondary education system. An *efficient* student transfer system performs this function in a timely manner, saving money for the public and the students by reducing outlays for education and improving the ability of students to recoup costs by timely entry into employment.

The cost savings to students of completing their first two years of college in the lower-cost community college system, before completing their undergraduate work in a baccalaureate institution, is key to access. This is particularly true for lower income students, but the cost savings accrue to all who use the transfer function. With lower-division coursework (a mix of general education and major preparation courses) completed in a community college, students can progress through the remainder of their degree program in the four-year institution.

DISPLAY 1 Methodology Used for Determining Time-to-Degree for CSU and UC Transfer Students

Using CPEC's Longitudinal Student Data System, data were queried for the class of community college transfer students who first enrolled in the CSU and UC during the 2000-01 academic year. These data are available through the spring 2005 term of the 2004-05 academic year. As defined here, the academic year runs from the fall term through the summer term, or spring term where no data for summer exist. All of the students included in this examination were first-time community college transfer students into the CSU and UC.

The Commission queried the CSU and UC cohorts by cross-referencing them with data on their baccalaureate degree attainment. Graduation information was examined for the academic terms fall 2000 through spring 2005 to determine time-to-degree for each academic term and for cumulative time periods. Not all of the fall 2000 transfer students into the CSU and UC had graduated by spring 2005.

The Commission identified 23,948 unit records of fall 2000 community college transfer students entering the CSU system. The information showed that 16,894 had graduated from CSU by the spring 2005 term, representing 70.5% of total graduates. Of the remaining 7,054 transfer students, 3,165 were still enrolled in a CSU campus and 3,889 had either left the system or no continuation or graduation record exists.

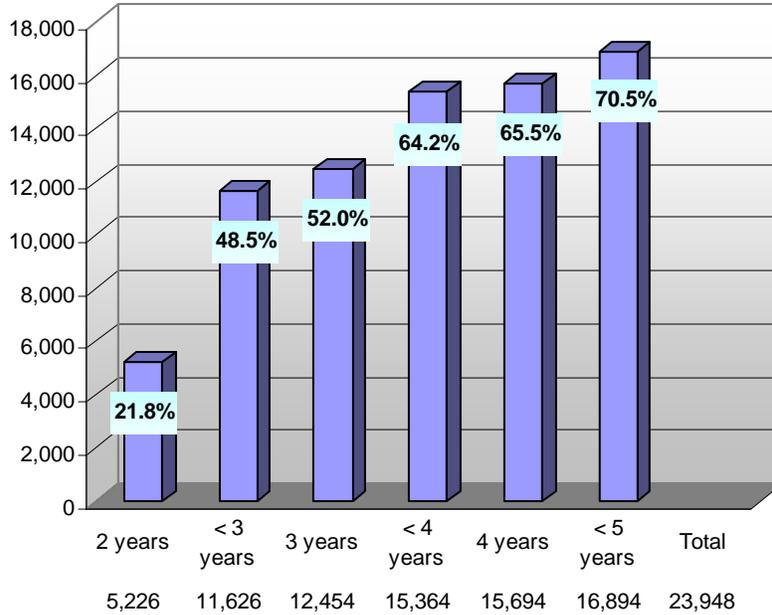
Of the 8,375 unit records for fall 2000 UC transfer students that were assessed, 7,245 students (86.5%) graduated by spring 2005. Unit records on the remaining 1,130 students show they were either still enrolled or exited the UC system.

The Commission also examined course taking patterns – defined here as the numbers of units attempted – for students in the CSU cohort who were still enrolled after three years (i.e., still enrolled as of fall 2003) and progressing towards graduation. This was done to examine their average course loads per term and other characteristics available in the data to more accurately describe these students' progress towards a degree.

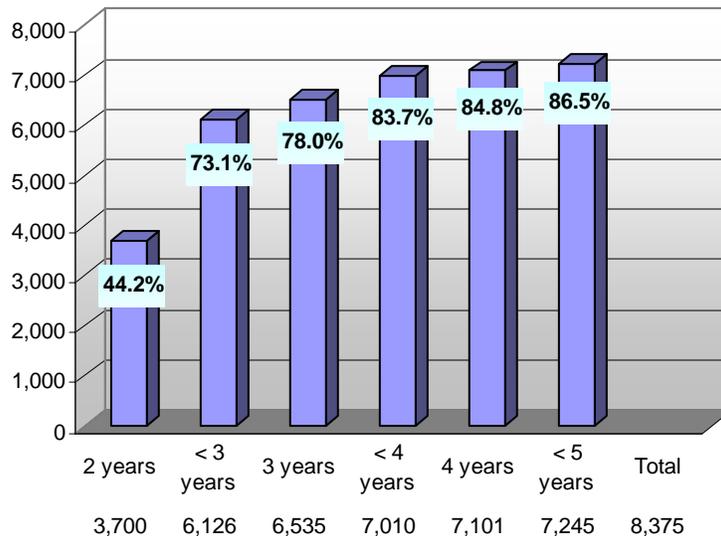
Detail and Findings

Displays 2 and 3 below chart the time-to-degree (bachelor’s degree attainment) over five academic years for community college transfer students after enrolling in the CSU and UC during 2000-01.

DISPLAY 2 CSU 2000-01 Transfer Student’s Time-to-Degree



DISPLAY 3 UC 2000-01 Transfer Student’s Time-to-Degree



Other Factors Affecting Time-to-Degree

There are a variety of reasons that students graduate when they do, as opposed to when they otherwise might be expected to finish. Many of these factors have to do with individual student decisions, while others are a result of issues out of their control. Some of the factors impacting the time to degree measured for fall 2000 transfer students include:

- *Course-taking decisions by students* – enrolling part-time for some academic terms, changing majors, repeating earlier courses to improve grades or stopping out of the CSU or UC for one or more terms.
- *Increases in student fee levels and costs of attendance* – between 2001-02 and 2004-05, mandatory UC student fees rose 64% to \$6,312 and CSU fees increased 55% to \$2,916; housing, transportation, and living expenses also continued to climb during the early 2000s. To pay these increased costs, students may have added work hours to their schedules and reduce their courseloads, which extends their time-to-degree.
- *Changes in declared majors and deficiencies in prior academic coursework* – some students change their majors during their upper-division years, necessitating additional coursework; similarly some students found they did not gain the skills needed in earlier coursework and chose to retake or supplement those courses in order to remain competitive.
- *The state's economic recession* – the 2001 to 2004 economic recession resulted in budget cuts that impacted campus operations in ways including reductions in course sections, reductions in student support services, and early faculty retirements.
- *Personal choice* – events and conditions in students' lives can affect enrollment decisions and a student's ability and willingness to continue in college.
- *Changes in financial assistance* – increases in the student loan and student and family contribution portions of financial aid, coupled with reductions in the share of the total aid package represented by grant aid, might have affected student persistence.

These and other factors likely affected the measured time to degree for these two cohorts of transfer students and would generally work to increase that time. For example, a student may have needed to work a greater number of hours in a job in order to pay for college. Or, some campuses might have reduced the number of course sections offered that a student needed to progress towards graduation in a specific semester.

Part-time and Stop-Out Enrollment in the CSU

In attempting to better understand CSU's transfer student enrollment patterns, and how they affect time-to-degree, the Commission conducted further analysis of the data, identifying data elements that reflect part-time and stop-out enrollment behavior. This inquiry was pursued for the CSU because students in this system are more likely to enroll part-time than UC students. More importantly, the time to degree for CSU transfer students appeared to be impacted by varying student behaviors.

The information on course load patterns shows the following for CSU students who either took longer than three years to graduate from the CSU or who were still enrolled in a CSU five years after transferring:

- 13.4 % enrolled in more than 90 semester units after transferring (the average for this group of students was just over 112 units).

- 14.2% enrolled in an average of fewer than 10 units per semester after transferring.

The longitudinal student data system information on these students also indicates that, excluding summer term enrollment, CSU transfer students who attained their degrees within three academic years took an average of more than 13 units per semester. Those students who took longer than three years to graduate took an average of just over 11 units per semester.

In addition, this inquiry found that some of the CSU transfer students in this cohort pursued supplementary educational outcomes. Some attained more than one bachelor's degree while enrolled for consecutive terms at CSU; some concurrently enrolled at CCC or UC and obtained an associate or bachelor's degree from that other system. These and other factors affect a relatively small number of this group of CSU students. However, these behaviors impact measured performance by appearing to lengthen the average time to degree for this group of students. These supplementary findings underscore the need for greater understanding of student goals as they evolve throughout the educational journey. Future measurements of student outcomes related to transfer will be strengthened by further investigation and examination of how the educational process impacts students' objectives.

The Need for Additional Information

The Commission's longitudinal student data system has certain limitations for undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the factors that drive time-to-degree performance. At present there are insufficient data elements to capture some student behaviors that impact both performance and outcomes. There are also environmental aspects that can have an impact upon student decision-making. Examples of these are listed under "Other Factors Affecting Time-to-Degree" above. Expansions to the longitudinal student data base would provide a more complete picture of student progression and would include data elements related to the socio-economic status of the student, data on financial aid, and completion status of units attempted. In addition to data on students, data on course availability would provide a better picture of the problems students encounter in trying to complete degree requirements.

Conclusions

This accountability report documents the time-to-degree of community college transfer students into the CSU and UC. It serves as a baseline measurement against which subsequent examinations can be compared.

The Commission measured degree attainment of two separate groups of community college transfer students – UC and CSU transfers first enrolling in the 2000-01 academic year. The data show that more than half the students who transferred to CSU attained degrees within three years, as did 78% of those students who transferred to UC.

The findings represent only some aspects of what students experience after transferring to the CSU and UC. Additional inquiry indicates that some CSU student enrollment and course-taking decisions resulted in their obtaining their baccalaureate degrees in more extended periods of time after transferring into the CSU from a community college.

In broadening the examination of time-to-degree for transfers, future accountability reports could include delineations by sub-groupings, such as ethnicity, gender, and comparisons of outcomes for different cohort years. The Commission and other researchers will build upon this initial report to acquire information that sheds more light on the area of transfer and other facets of student persistence and degree completion.

