

Characteristics of Early Community College Dropouts

By Peter Crosta

Students who drop out of community college are expensive. Over a five-year period, federal, state, and local authorities spent about \$4 billion on community college students who began as first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students but did not return for a second year of school (Schneider & Yin, 2011). In an era where the policy focus is on accountability and efficiency, improving first-year persistence is a critical goal.

For colleges to develop effective dropout prevention strategies, it is necessary to have a clear picture of who these early dropouts are. This report aims to identify distinguishing characteristics of this group by analyzing six years of transcript data on 14,429 first-time college students who in 2005 and 2006 enrolled at one of five community colleges in a single state. Of these students, 28 percent never returned to the same college after their first semester. This outcome represents the most common enrollment and exit pattern among students in the sample—more students dropped out en masse after the first term than at any other time. The majority of these students never attended any college again.

This analysis departs from other work on dropout and persistence in two important ways: It includes part-time students (who constitute a majority of first-time enrollees at community colleges), and it focuses on very early dropouts—those who enrolled for one term of study but never returned to the same college for another term. For the purposes of this report, these early dropouts are compared with a group called early persisters (67 percent of students in the sample)—those who enrolled at least twice in the first four enrollment terms (fall, spring, summer, and fall).

DEFINITIONS

EARLY DROPOUTS

Those who enrolled for one term of study but never returned to the same college for another term.

EARLY PERSISTERS

Those who enrolled at least twice in the first four enrollment terms (fall, spring, summer, and fall).

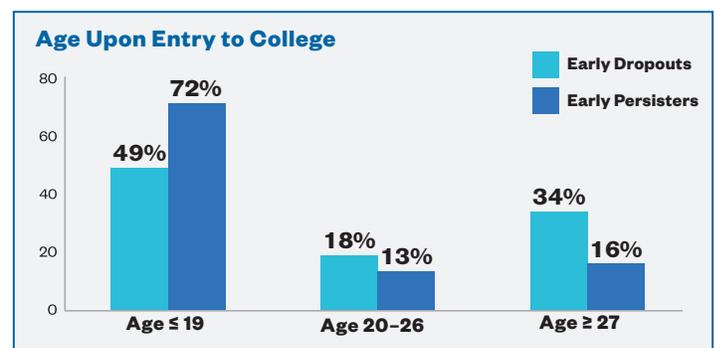
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Findings

Age

Perhaps the most notable demographic difference between early dropouts and early persisters is that early dropouts were older. Early dropouts in our sample were about twice as likely to have started college at or after age 27. The average starting age for early dropouts was 27; for early persisters, it was 22.

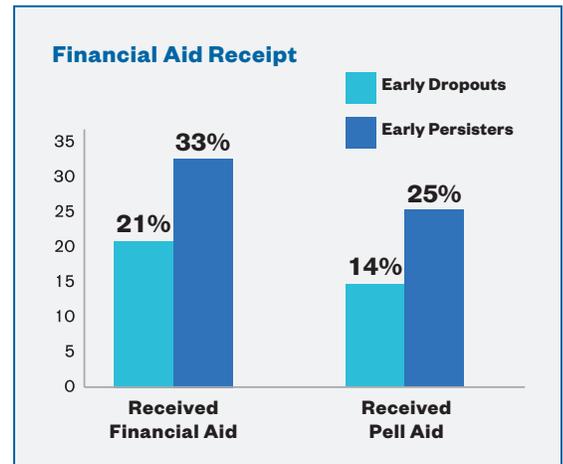
Older students face substantial challenges. Compared with younger students, they are more likely to be married, working, have children. Older students thus have tighter time and financial constraints.



Financial Aid and Socioeconomic Status

Early dropouts in our sample were about 40 percent less likely than early persisters to receive financial aid or a Pell award in their first term of study. This finding also reflects age differences, as older students were less likely to receive federal financial support than traditional-age students.

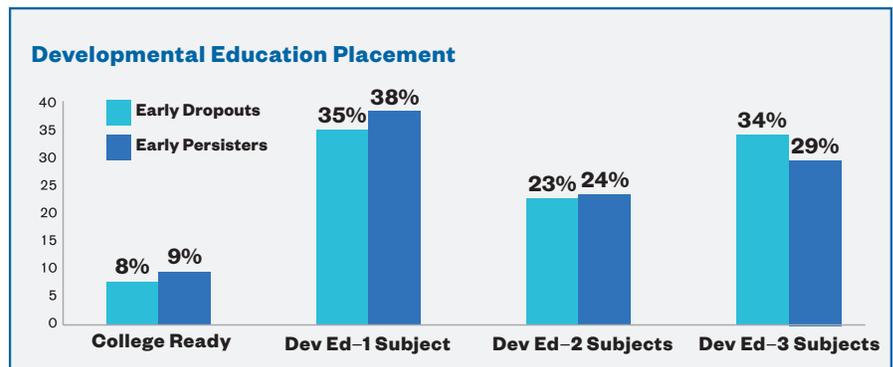
Early dropouts and early persisters did not differ on a socioeconomic status index generated from the characteristics of their census block groups. Yet the early dropouts' lower likelihood of receiving financial aid may suggest that they were of higher socioeconomic status. It is also possible that early dropouts were less likely to fill out the paperwork required to receive aid, possibly because they enrolled in fewer courses. On average, while early persisters took 10 credits in the first term, early dropouts took 7.3 credits.



Academic Preparedness

In terms of secondary school credentials, there were very few differences between early dropouts and early persisters. Early dropouts were slightly less likely than early persisters to have earned a high school diploma (86 percent versus 90 percent) and more likely to have earned a GED (7 percent versus 4 percent).

However, there are important differences in the placement of students from the two groups into developmental courses. Early dropouts were about 5 percentage points more likely than early persisters to be referred to developmental education in three subject areas (reading, writing, and math); they were also more likely to be placed at two or more levels below college-level in all three subject areas.



| FAILURE / WITHDRAWAL / INCOMPLETE RATES IN DEVELOPMENTAL AND COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES | | |
|--|------------------|--------------------|
| COURSE | % EARLY DROPOUTS | % EARLY PERSISTERS |
| College Student Success | 57 | 23 |
| Introduction to College Reading * | 56 | 18 |
| Improved College Reading * | 61 | 24 |
| Composition Strategies * | 58 | 18 |
| Writing Foundations * | 65 | 30 |
| Basic Math Skills * | 65 | 25 |
| Essential Mathematics * | 68 | 28 |
| Introductory Algebra * | 58 | 31 |
| Expository Writing | 46 | 18 |
| Basic PC Literacy | 29 | 23 |
| Introduction to Computers | 61 | 28 |
| Introduction to Sociology | 37 | 23 |
| General Psychology | 36 | 19 |

*Denotes developmental education course

College Course Success

Perhaps not surprisingly, early dropouts performed very poorly in their only enrolled term. Rates of failure, withdrawal, and incomplete grades among early dropouts were about 30 to 40 percentage points higher than those for early persisters. The highest failure rates occurred in developmental education courses.

Online Course Enrollment

Under the hypothesis that time constraints remain a barrier to college progression, technology is an oft-cited partial solution to dropout. In the first term, early dropouts in the sample were more likely than early persisters to enroll in online classes (9 percent versus 5 percent, respectively), and early dropouts were less likely than early persisters to enroll in hybrid classes (39 percent versus 43 percent, respectively). About half of the courses (52 percent) taken by both early dropouts and early persisters were face-to-face (traditional classroom setting).

For early dropouts, failure rates for all course delivery methods were about 50 percent, but for early persisters, the lowest failure rate occurred in hybrid courses (25 percent), and the highest failure rate occurred in online courses (37 percent). The failure rate in face-to-face courses for early persisters was 29 percent. Thus, while early dropouts did not fail online or hybrid courses at a higher rate than face-to-face courses, these data do not suggest that courses taught in a fully online environment would be beneficial for stemming early dropout. That online courses are not a panacea is consistent with some recent empirical evidence (see Jaggars, 2011).

Returning to College

Finally, not all early dropouts from community college leave postsecondary education altogether. National Student Clearinghouse data allowed us to follow some students for up to six years after they first enrolled in community college. Among our sample of 4,000 early dropouts, 46 received a certificate or associate degree from another two-year college, 595 enrolled in a four-year school, and of these, 116 earned a bachelor's degree. The majority (84 percent), however, ended their postsecondary studies after one term of study.

Discussion and Conclusion

These descriptive results show that the early dropouts came from an older population. While early dropouts did not differ appreciably from early persisters in terms of secondary credentials, their developmental placement rates suggest that they were somewhat less academically prepared than early persisters.

Early dropouts performed very poorly in their college coursework, particularly in their developmental courses. With failure and withdrawal rates in some courses approaching 70 percent, it is clear that the first-term experience for early dropouts was not a positive one.

Since many students drop out of community college during or just after the first semester, academic and institutional researchers should work to understand the early dropout population in greater detail. The behavior of early dropouts in this study suggests an academic support deficiency and perhaps also problems in the domain of teaching and learning. Among students in our sample, using an online delivery method does not seem to have a clear correlation with early dropout. To reverse the trend of early dropout, colleges need to make greater effort to detect early failure and provide more meaningful academic support to students who are at risk of struggling in their first semester.

References

Jaggars, S. S. (2011). *Online learning: Does it help low-income and underprepared students?* (CCRC Working Paper No. 26). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

Schneider, M., & Yin, L. (2011). *The hidden costs of community colleges*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

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