

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a bold national effort to help more community college students succeed, with a special focus on students of color and low-income students. The initiative proceeds from the premise that success begets success, using a student-centered model of institutional improvement to create a culture of evidence in which data and inquiry drive broad-based institutional efforts to close achievement gaps and improve student outcomes overall.

Attendance and Completion Patterns

Community college students take circuitous routes through their education; very few enroll full-time and continue until they graduate. Erratic enrollment patterns have been negatively linked with academic progress and eventual credential completion—students enrolled continuously and on a full-time basis are more likely to attain their academic goals than those not enrolled continuously or who drop to part-time status.¹ Students' irregular enrollment sequences may stem from many causes, including:

- Changes in income and the need to balance work, family, and academics.
- Socioeconomic and cultural differences. For example, Latino families have been found to prefer their children to attend colleges close to home. This can lead to the increased likelihood that students work while enrolled, and thus are more likely to attend part-time.²
- Women are more likely than men to enroll part-time. This could be due to the fact that female community college students tend to be older than male students, and older community college students are more likely to have families. Further, females are more likely to have primary responsibility for the care of children, which often leads them to part-time attendance.³

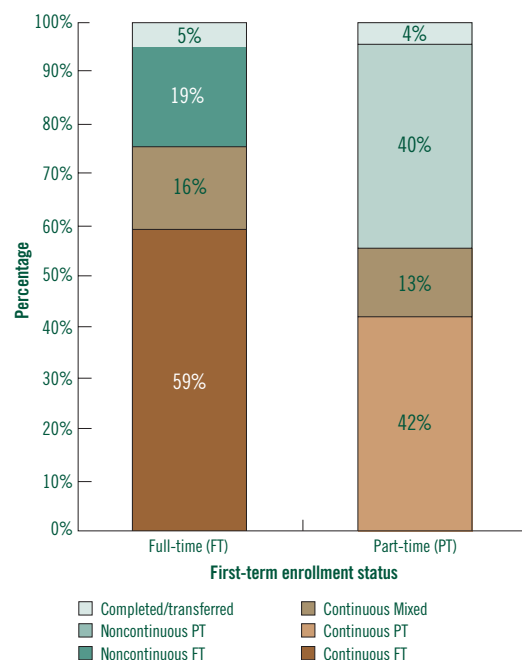
This analysis, which followed students through three regular academic years to identify their varying attendance patterns, may help colleges find ways to reduce the time it takes students to complete their credentials.⁴ Determining students' reasons for changing their enrollment status may help colleges become more sensitive to how they might help students who are intent on their goals, but inconsistent in their pursuit of education.

First Academic Year

About half, 52 percent, of Achieving the Dream students began their academic careers enrolled full-time.⁵ However, only 31 percent of these students attended full-time for the first full year.⁶ Figure 1 displays the attendance and completion patterns of Achieving the Dream students for their first year, based on whether

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Figure 1. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by first-term enrollment status, and first-year attendance and completion status



Note: Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were not included. The earliest cohorts for each Round were included in this analysis (cohorts 2002 and 2003 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohorts 2003 and 2004 for Round 3; cohorts 2004 and 2005 for Round 4; and cohort 2006 for Cohort 2009 colleges).

¹ United States General Accounting Office, *College Completion: Additional Efforts Could Help Education with Its Completion Goals*, Washington, DC: May 2003. Available: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03568.pdf>.

² Goldrick-Rab, S. *Promoting Academic Momentum at Community Colleges: Challenges and Opportunities*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College–Columbia University, New York: February 2007. Available: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERIC-Docs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/28/00/fe.pdf

³ Clery, S. *Data Notes, Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data: Minority Males: Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Student Outcomes*. Vol. 3, No. 1. January/February 2008. Available: http://www.achievingthedream.org/_pdfs/datanotes/DataNotes-JanFeb-2008.pdf

⁴ Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were not included. The first two cohorts for each round were included in this analysis (cohorts 2002 and 2003 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohorts 2003 and 2004 for Round 3; cohorts 2004 and 2005 for Round 4; and cohort 2006 for Cohort 2009 colleges).

⁵ Attempting 12 credits or more qualifies a student for full-time status.

⁶ An additional 3 percent completed or transferred during the first year. Full-year attendance was defined as attending all terms during the regular academic year. For example, students attending colleges on quarter calendars had to enroll fall, winter and spring terms to be defined as full-year; full-year students on semester calendars attended both fall and spring terms.



Achieving the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

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What Is a Cohort?

A cohort is a group of people studied during a period of 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 makes it possible to compare 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.

they were full- or part-time during their first term of enrollment. Seventy-five percent of first-term, full-time (FTFT) students were enrolled in all terms during the first academic year. Further, about 6 in 10 students completed their first year on a full-time, full-year basis, while 16 percent of FTFT students dropped to part-time for consecutive first-year term(s). Nineteen percent of students—about 1 in 5—did not enroll for consecutive term(s) during the first year. Five percent of FTFT students completed credentials or transferred during the first year.

“About half, 52 percent, of Achieving the Dream students began their academic careers enrolled full-time...only 31 percent of these students attended full-time for the first full year.”

Students starting part-time were more likely than full-time students to stop out⁷ during the first year: About 20 percent of FTFT students stopped out during the first year, compared with 40 percent of first-term part-time (FTPT) students. Slightly more than half, 56 percent, of FTPT students were enrolled for the entire first year. Interestingly, 13 percent of FTPT students shifted to full-time enrollment after the first enrollment period. This finding could be the result of students enrolling in developmental courses during the first term. Such courses are often excluded from formulas used to determine full-time status. By the second term, these students may have completed developmental education coursework, allowing all of their attempted credits to be counted as credential bearing, thus identifying them as full-time. Four percent of FTPT students completed credentials or transferred to another institution—either 2- or 4-year—during the first year.

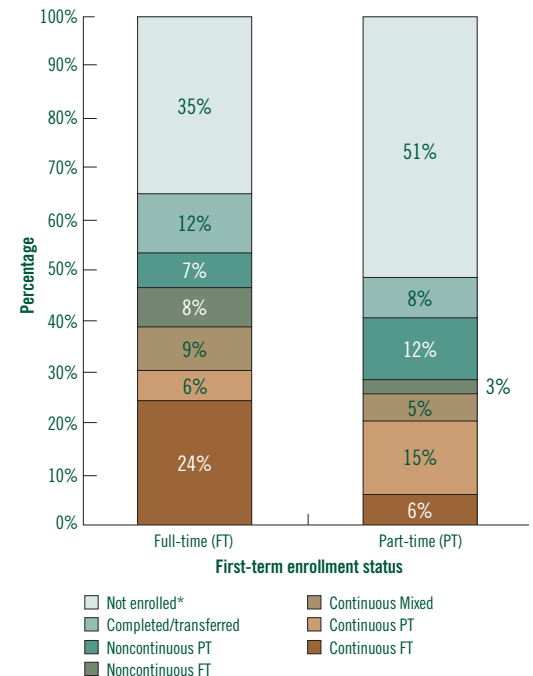
Second Academic Year

Figure 2 displays students' attendance patterns during their second academic year, by their

“FTPT students were more likely to stop out for the entire second year than FTFT students, 51 percent compared with 35 percent, respectively.”

enrollment status during the first year's first term. It is immediately evident that FTPT students were more likely to stop out for the entire second year than FTFT students, 51 percent compared with 35 percent, respectively. Further,

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by first-term enrollment status, and second-year attendance and completion status



Note: Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were not included. The earliest cohorts for each Round were included in this analysis (cohorts 2002 and 2003 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohorts 2003 and 2004 for Round 3; cohorts 2004 and 2005 for Round 4; and cohort 2006 for Cohort 2009 colleges).

39 percent of FTFT students were continuously enrolled during the second year, compared with 26 percent of FTPT students. Likewise, a much higher proportion of FTFT students attended their second year on a full-time continuous basis as compared with FTPT students, 24 and 6 percent, respectively. However, it is noteworthy that 6 percent of FTPT students persisted to the second year and enrolled full-time continuously throughout the academic year. A significant proportion of FTPT students continued through the second year enrolling part-time only for all terms attended, whether their enrollments were continuous or not—27 percent. Comparatively, this percentage was 13 percent for FTFT students. By the end of the second year, 12 percent of FTFT students completed or transferred compared with 8 percent of FTPT students.⁸

Third Academic Year

Figure 3 illustrates that, for those enrolled in the third year, FTFT and FTPT students' attendance patterns began to converge. During the third year, 10 percent of both FTFT and FTPT students enrolled non-continuously. Nineteen percent of FTFT students enrolled during the

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⁷ A “stop out” is defined for purposes herein as anyone who does not enroll in one given term; he or she may enroll in consecutive terms, or may not return at all during the studied period.

⁸ This includes students who completed or transferred during their first or second academic years. Students who completed during their first or second years may have completed credentials in short programs, or a degree, and may have transferred credits from another institution.

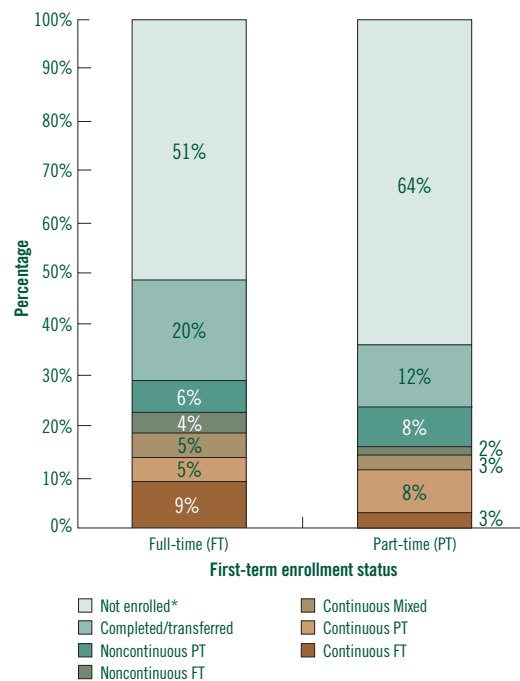
“By the end of three years, 20 percent of FTFT students completed credentials or transferred to other institutions... 12 percent of FTPT students completed credentials or transferred to other institutions.”

third year on a continuous basis, as did 14 percent of FTPT students. FTFT students displayed a notable advantage in completion and transfer rates by the end of the third year: 20 percent of the FTFT students completed or transferred compared with 12 percent of FTPT students.⁹ During the third year, 51 percent of FTFT students and 64 percent of FTPT students did not enroll, complete, or transfer.

Enrollment Summary

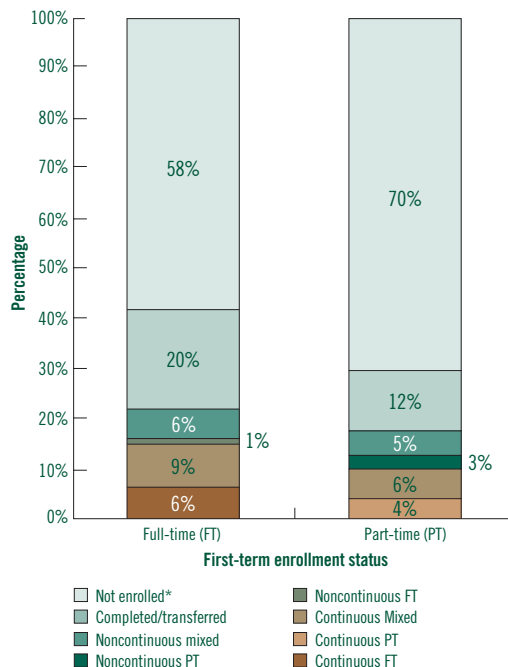
Figure 4 summarizes students' enrollment patterns over the three years. Here, a student is defined as not enrolled if he or she did not enroll for the last term of the regular academic year or had not completed a credential or transferred over the three academic years. Fifty-eight percent of FTFT and 70 percent of FTPT students

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by first-term enrollment status, and third-year attendance and completion status



Note: Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were not included. The earliest cohorts for each Round were included in this analysis (cohorts 2002 and 2003 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohorts 2003 and 2004 for Round 3; cohorts 2004 and 2005 for Round 4; and cohort 2006 for Cohort 2009 colleges).

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of Achieving the Dream students by first-term enrollment status, and attendance and completion status over three years



*“Not enrolled” students are those who did not enroll for the last term of the third academic year.

Note: Summer terms and mid-winter short terms were not included. The earliest cohorts for each Round were included in this analysis (cohorts 2002 and 2003 for Rounds 1 and 2; cohorts 2003 and 2004 for Round 3; cohorts 2004 and 2005 for Round 4; and cohort 2006 for Cohort 2009 colleges).

were not enrolled, nor did they complete or transfer.

By the end of three years, 20 percent of FTFT students completed credentials or transferred to other institutions. The majority of FTFT students still enrolled at the end of year 3 displayed three-year enrollment patterns that included part-time terms, or terms not enrolled; of the remaining 22 percent of FTFT students, 16 percent had at least one part-time or stop-out enrollment period.

Twelve percent of FTPT students completed credentials or transferred to other institutions. Of the remaining 18 percent of FTPT students still enrolled at the end of year 3, 4 percent continuously enrolled part-time, and an additional 3 percent enrolled non-continuously on a part-time basis. Eleven percent of FTPT students enrolled continuously or non-continuously, with some terms of full-time enrollment.

What Does this Mean?

This analysis suggests that, in addition to leaving college without credentials, students often shift among full-time, part-time, and non-attendance.

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⁹ The third-year completion and transfer rate is a cumulative rate including all students completing or transferring in years one, two and three. It is interesting to note the number of students who started FTFT but did not complete or transfer until the third year; some students started full-time during the first term but did not necessarily attend all other terms and all other years full-time. Many students take terms off or drop to part-time attendance, thus needing more than two years to complete their credential or transfer; further analysis is needed to determine differences in FTFT completer/transfer students' attendance patterns during other than the first term.

Measuring persistence simply by determining if a student enrolls over successive enrollment periods misses the complexity indicated by these data, as community college students take many diverse paths to achieve their goals. Students who began enrolling full-time were more likely to persist, especially on a continual basis, and complete credentials or transfer than their classmates who initially enrolled part-time. This could be due to the fact that part-time students are not necessarily enrolling with credential attainment or transfer as their final goal; part-time students are more likely to attend community colleges with other goals in mind, such as upgrading skills or personal enrichment. Having said this, the number of part-time students who evolved into full-time students revealed in this analysis is noteworthy. However, the results suggest that special attention should be paid to students who start part-time—they were not only more likely to stop out, but they showed more variation in later enrollment patterns than those who started full-time.

Community colleges provide flexibility for students with numerous demands to mesh their education with life's responsibilities. Colleges' challenge to increase student success is linked to their ability to convert more part-time students to full-time, and maintain continuous enrollment. Pre-enrollment advising and the identification of short-term goals can aid students in planning successful paths to their goals. Also, identifying differences in enrollment patterns among groups of students with different attributes may help colleges design appropriate interventions to sustain their students' continuous enrollment. Finally, colleges should consider

contacting students who stop out, not only to find out why they left, but also to find out what needs to change for them to re-enroll and remain engaged. Questions for investigation include:

- What are the enrollment patterns of our students?
- Why do students switch between full- and part-time attendance?
- What are the reasons our students stop out?
- What are the differences between students who stop out and those who do not return?
- Are enrollment patterns different for males and females? Or for specific racial/ethnic groups? Does Pell grant receipt make a difference?
- What is the difference in student characteristics and outcomes for students persisting at the same enrollment intensity, and those who change enrollment levels?
- Does increasing the number of full-time, continuous students affect completion and transfer rates?
- Does Pell Grant receipt have an effect on attendance? Are all of our eligible students receiving Pell Grants?
- Are students who attend part-time receiving the same level of advising, counseling, administrative support, and student aid advice as those attending full-time?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of Data Notes, featuring your college's data, at www.dreamwebsubmission.org. ■

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. Edited by MDC Inc.'s Communications Director, Richard Hart. Newsletter production by Linda Marcetti, Asterisk & Image.

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 issue of *Data Notes* uses the January 2010 version of the Achieving the Dream database. Institutions are identified by the year they started work with the initiative.

Data may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.