Delayed Enrollment: Is It a Risk?

Research has found that, generally, students who delay enrollment in postsecondary education after high school graduation are at higher risk for not completing credentials when compared with students enrolling immediately after high school. Students delaying enrollment are, obviously, older and may have different reasons for enrolling and different educational goals. Students who delay enrollment often have work experience and may come to their education with different skills than do students directly out of high school. Others who delay enrollment may have done so to start families. Regardless of their reasons, once enrolled, their challenges in persisting or completing differ from those of students enrolling immediately after high school.

Knowing the characteristics of students enrolling immediately after high school graduation compared with those who delay enrollment, along with the variations in their respective outcomes, can help colleges identify the differences between the two populations and tailor their programs to increase student success.

This issue of Data Notes examines characteristics and three-year outcome differences between students who enroll in Achieving the Dream colleges immediately after high school and those who delay their enrollments. Recent high school graduates were identified based on the student’s reported high school graduation year and the year the student first enrolled in the Achieving the Dream college. Comparisons were conducted between students who enrolled during the fall immediately following high school graduation, those who delayed enrollment one to two years, three to four years, and five or more years after graduating. Student characteristics examined include: attendance status, developmental education needs, type of major, gender, race/ethnicity, and Pell grant receipt.

Timing of College Enrollment and Outcomes

The amount of time between high school graduation and college enrollment is an important indicator of later student success outcomes. Nearly half, 48 percent of students enrolling in Achieving the Dream colleges enrolled in the fall term immediately following high school graduation (Figure 1). About one-fifth, 19 percent, enrolled within one to two years, and one quarter of students waited five or more years to enroll. The remaining 8 percent enrolled within three to four years of graduating from high school.

Students who enrolled immediately after high school graduation were more likely to persist than were students who delayed their enrollment, yet completion and transfer rates were similar, and, contrary to previous research, sometimes slightly higher, for students who delayed their enrollment.

Note: The following student cohorts were included in this analysis: Round 1, 2002, 2003; Round 2, 2003, 2004; Round 3, 2004, 2005; Round 4, 2005, 2006, Round 5, 2006, 2007; Round 6, 2007. Only students with valid high school graduation data were included; 76 percent of student records carry valid high school graduation year data and were included in this analysis.

Students who enrolled immediately after high school graduation were more likely to persist than were students who delayed their enrollment, yet completion and transfer rates were similar, and, contrary to previous research, sometimes slightly higher, for students who delayed their enrollment.

Note: The following student cohorts were included in this analysis: Round 1, 2002, 2003; Round 2, 2003, 2004; Round 3, 2004, 2005; Round 4, 2005, 2006, Round 5, 2006, 2007; Round 6, 2007. Only students with valid high school graduation data were included; 76 percent of student records carry valid high school graduation year data and were included in this analysis.

Students who enrolled immediately after high school graduation were more likely to persist than were students who delayed their enrollment, yet completion and transfer rates were similar, and, contrary to previous research, sometimes slightly higher, for students who delayed their enrollment.

Note: The following student cohorts were included in this analysis: Round 1, 2002, 2003; Round 2, 2003, 2004; Round 3, 2004, 2005; Round 4, 2005, 2006, Round 5, 2006, 2007; Round 6, 2007. Only students with valid high school graduation data were included; 76 percent of student records carry valid high school graduation year data and were included in this analysis.

Students who enrolled immediately after high school graduation were more likely to persist than were students who delayed their enrollment, yet completion and transfer rates were similar, and, contrary to previous research, sometimes slightly higher, for students who delayed their enrollment.
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.

Yet completion and transfer rates were similar, and, contrary to previous research, sometimes slightly higher, for students who delayed their enrollment. Seventy-nine percent of students enrolling in the fall term immediately after completing high school persisted to the spring, compared with 62 to 66 percent of those who delayed their enrollment (Figure 2). Second and third year persistence rates continue to be higher for students enrolling immediately compared with those who delay enrollment. The difference continues into the third year, where the 34 percent of students that enrolled immediately were still enrolled with 22 to 25 percent of those students who delayed their enrollment. The difference in the persistence rates between immediate and delayed rates over time declines.

Students in the two groups may have different education goals, have variations in previous college credits accumulated, may be referred to fewer developmental classes, or have different enrollment intensities. Interestingly, these differences coupled with the earlier advantage seen in persistence rates for the immediate college enrollees did not translate into higher graduation rates immediately completed or transferred as did 17 to 19 percent of those who delayed.

Noteworthy, is that among students who delayed enrollment, those who delayed only one to two years persisted, completed, and transferred at rates slightly higher than those who delayed five or more years; thus, the longer the delay, the lower the chances for persistence, completion, or transfer.

Who Delays Enrollment?

Students who delay their enrollment have different characteristics when compared with immediate enrollees. Not surprisingly, students enrolling immediately after high school were more likely to enroll full-time than those delaying their enrollment: 70 percent of students enrolling immediately enrolled full-time compared with 54, 42 and 29 percent of those delaying one to two, three to four, or five years or more (Figure 3).

Interestingly, students enrolling immediately were more likely to enroll in transfer-seeking programs as opposed to terminal-seeking, while the reverse was true for those delaying enrollment. Furthermore, the longer the student delayed enrollment, the more likely he or she was to enroll in a terminal-seeking program. Older students who delay their postsecondary enrollment after high school graduation may have clearer vocational goals and need to gain employment as quickly as possible compared to those coming directly out of high school.

The longer students delay enrollment the less likely they are to start college with developmental needs. Thirty percent of students enrolling immediately required no developmental education compared with 63 percent of those delaying enrollment. The percentage of students who completed or transferred by the end of the second academic year was 11 percent for immediate enrollees, only slightly lower than the 12 to 14 percent for delayed enrollees. Further analysis of the types of credentials students earned may reveal that students who delay enrollment with work experience enroll to gain work-related training and credentials in the form of short-term certificates rather than longer-term associate’s degrees.

The end of the third year, the gap effectively disappeared; 18 percent of students enrolling among students who delayed enrollment, those who delayed only one to two years persisted, completed, and transferred at rates slightly higher than those who delayed five or more years..."
The majority, 61 percent of students enrolling immediately, were referred to developmental math—one or more levels. Students who delayed their enrollment were much less likely to be referred to developmental math, 50 to 56 percent of students who delayed enrollment were placed at college level. Fewer students require developmental English and reading than math; however, the trend is the same with students enrolling immediately being referred at higher rates than those who delay their enrollment, and the longer the enrollment is delayed, the less need there is for developmental education. One explanation for this might be the difference in choice of a transfer-seeking versus a terminal-seeking program. In some colleges, students in terminal-seeking programs, chosen more by delayed entry students, do not have to meet the same entry requirements as those in transfer programs. An alternative possibility may be that students defined as delaying their enrollment at the Achieving the Dream institution had transferred from another postsecondary institution where they completed their developmental education, or already had a degree. Finally, older students may have work experience that decreased their need for developmental education.

Overall, about one in four students studied received Pell grants. Students delaying the enrollment 5 years or more were slightly more likely to

(continued on next page)
receive Pell grants, 42 percent, than those enrolling immediately, 39 percent. This is likely due to the fact that students delaying enrollment are independent students no longer associated with their parents’ incomes and may have families of their own to support. Interestingly, 37 percent of those who delayed their enrollment 1 to 2 years received Pell grants, which is a slight decline from those who enrolled immediately or waited longer to enroll.

By race/ethnicity, Hispanic students comprised a larger proportion of students enrolling immediately compared with those who delay their enrollment. Conversely, the proportion of students delaying enrollment that are Black, non-Hispanic increases with length of delay. The proportion of students that are white, non-Hispanic varies only slightly from 50 to 52 percent.

Females were more likely to delay enrollment compared with males: 52 percent of immediate enrollees were female, but 64 percent of students entering college after five years were females. Compared with men, women may face more family obligations that cause them to delay college enrollment.

### Enrollment Timing, Outcomes and Characteristics

The data show that students enrolling immediately after high school were more likely to persist, complete, or transfer by the end of the third academic year when compared with students delaying enrollment, 53 compared with 42 percent (Figure 4). Including student characteristics shows several interesting differences:

- Students who enrolled immediately after high school and who attended college full-time were more likely to persist, complete or persist within three years than were their part-time counterparts, 56 compared with 45 percent. Students who delayed enrollment, but attended full-time, were more likely to achieve better three-year outcomes than those enrolling immediately, but on a part-time basis, 48 compared with 45 percent.

...students enrolling immediately after high school graduation and referred to three developmental education subjects were more likely to be successful at the end of three years than were delayed enrollment students with no developmental needs...

- Students coming straight out of high school and enrolling in transfer-seeking programs, exceeded three-year outcome success measures by 5 percentage points compared with those in terminal-seeking programs; however students who delayed enrollment were just about as likely to succeed in both transfer- and terminal-seeking programs.

- Enrolling immediately after high school increased students’ chances of succeeding within three years, regardless of the number of developmental subjects the student took. Noteworthy is the fact that students enrolling immediately after high school graduation and referred to three developmental

(continued on next page)
education subjects were more likely to be successful at the end of three years than were delayed enrollment students with no developmental needs.

- Immediate enrollees who did not receive Pell grants were more likely to be successful at the end of three years than those who received Pell grants. The relationship was reverse for delayed enrollment students; those with Pell grants were more likely to be successful than those without Pell grants.

**What Does It Mean?**

Nearly one-half of students enrolled in Achieving the Dream Colleges directly after high school. The other half delayed their enrollment for some period of time—about one-fifth for one to two years, and one-quarter for five years or more. The findings somewhat support previous findings that delaying enrollment reduces the chances of student success: persistence rates were higher for students enrolling immediately after high school than for those who delayed; however, that did not translate into higher completion and transfer rates for the early enrollees.

The longer students delayed their enrollment, the more likely they were to enroll part-time. Delayed enrollment students were more likely to be in terminal-seeking majors and require less developmental education, both in depth and breadth than immediate enrollees. Furthermore, delayed enrollees were more likely to be Pell grant recipients than were those enrolling immediately after high school. A slightly larger proportion of delayed enrollees were Black, non-Hispanic when compared with those who enroll immediately, while a smaller proportion was Hispanic. Females comprised a larger share of delayed enrollees.

The findings also indicate that students delaying their enrollment and attending part-time have the lowest combined three-year persistence, completion, and transfer rate. Delayed enrollment students were different from those coming directly out of high school and have different goals and needs compared with their younger peers. Given that this group of older enrollees represents half of the incoming students, improving their success rates will go a long way toward improving completion and transfer rates. Compared with students enrolling directly from high school, older students have different educational goals and different enrollment patterns, but once the early drop-outs have left the college, seem to be tenacious in their commitment to reaching their goals. Colleges should spend some time identifying the goals and needs of these delayed enrollment students to ensure proper and necessary support is provided to help them succeed.

Given the knowledge that delaying enrollment in college is oftentimes negatively related with outcomes, the following questions might help colleges further explore this issue:

- We know the effects developmental needs have on student outcomes. How does the success rate of delayed enrollment students in developmental education compare with those students just out of high school?
- What percent of the delayed enrollment students do not plan to work toward credentials at the time they enroll?
- What are the differences in the distribution of program major choices for immediately and delayed enrollment students?
- How do our overall persistence and completion rates compare between recent high school graduates and delayed enrollees?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college’s data, at the Achieving the Dream National Database website, 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., and edited by Katie Loovis, Achieving the Dream’s Chief Operating Officer. Newsletter production by Linda Marcetti, founder of Asterisk & Image, subcontractor to JBL Associates, 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.

**Note:** This issue of *Data Notes* uses the April 2011 version of the Achieving the Dream National Database. Institutions are grouped by the year they started work with the Achieving the Dream.