



National Student Clearinghouse™  
Research Center™



# The Role of Community Colleges in Postsecondary Success

Community Colleges Outcomes Report



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**A**s many of you know firsthand, community colleges educate more than 12 million students each year, preparing them for their pathways to success, whether in higher education or their professional careers. They also provide critical pathways to four-year institutions for students seeking to transfer.

Every week, community colleges announce new efforts to provide affordable options for students to obtain a postsecondary degree or non-credit program to advance their careers and qualities of life. However, community college leaders and policymakers must continue to discuss and decide what should be measured, how data can be aggregated, and which benchmarks identify what successful pathways look like.

To help community colleges tell their impact and stories, the National Student Clearinghouse and the Association of Community College Trustees are working with these great institutions to provide the latest research, resources and metrics needed.

Given the multiple missions community colleges have and the diverse services they provide, the metrics used to assess their effectiveness must be updated to include more than just the graduation rate of first-time, full-time students. To assist community colleges with the metrics needed, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center views the following three categories as important indicators of community college progress:

1. College Persistence
2. Transfer and Mobility
3. Certificate and Degree Completion

### **College Persistence**

Six out of 10 students who begin college at a two-year public institution persist into the second fall term. Of the students who persist, nearly one in five do so at a transfer destination.

### **Transfer and Mobility**

Of all students who began college at two-year public institutions in fall 2008, 24.4 percent transferred to a four-year institution within six years and 15.0 percent transferred to two-year institutions (lateral transfer), for an overall transfer rate of 39.6 percent.

### **Certificate and Degree Completion**


In the 2016 Signature Report on completion rates, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that 30 percent of the fall 2010 entering cohort of community college students completed their first credential within six years at either the initial institution where they were enrolled or at a different two-year college. In addition, another 9.3 percent completed their first credential at a four-year institution.

The data continue to show that policymakers and education administrators need to take a more varied approach in determining community college effectiveness and supporting community colleges in order to help students succeed.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center and the Association of Community College Trustees are committed to meeting assessment needs through tracking student persistence and retention, transfer and mobility, and student outcomes, whether for two- and four-year degree attainment or technical and professional education. Our organizations are able to support your efforts to help students keep track of their learning progression and outcomes, and assure that the institutions providing the education, learning, skills, and abilities sought are recognized for their work.

We look forward to working with you in telling as complete a story of the students impacted as the data permits. Watch for more to come in 2017 and beyond.

May you and your community have a successful 2017 and let us know how we can help you!



Ricardo Torres  
President and CEO  
National Student Clearinghouse



National Student  
Clearinghouse®



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# The Role of Community Colleges in Postsecondary Success

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Community colleges play a critical role in expanding postsecondary education opportunity. In addition to offering degrees and certificates of high quality in their own right, they also provide critical pathways to four-year institutions for students seeking to transfer. These options are increasingly indispensable for under-served and dis-advantaged students, working adults, and students with family or employment responsibilities, enabling them to achieve their educational goals with affordable, flexible, and accessible offerings. During times of economic hardship, community colleges provide additional education and job skills training to individuals affected by unemployment, as reflected in community college enrollment trends during and after the Great Recession (NSC, 2016a). Considering the wide-ranging economic impact and diversity of services that community colleges provide, it has become increasingly clear that a more holistic range of metrics is needed to help community colleges tell their stories. Taken alone, the graduation rate of first-time, full-time students is no longer a sufficient measure of community college success.

Since its inception in 2010, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has been working to develop a range of educational outcomes reporting that takes into account the various pathways of postsecondary students. Its research uses student-level data provided exclusively to the National Student Clearinghouse by our nationwide network of postsecondary institutions. This document synthesizes key community college metrics published by the Research Center in the following three categories, which are important indicators of community college progress:

1. College Access and Persistence
2. Transfer and Mobility
3. Certificate and Degree Completion

## College Access and Persistence

*Of all students who begin college at a two-year public institution, six out of 10 persist into the second fall term. Of the students who persist, nearly one in five do so at a transfer destination.*

Community colleges are a gateway to postsecondary education, especially for students who graduate from low socio-economic status high schools. The Research Center's annual High School Benchmarks Report found that nearly half of the graduates from low socio-economic status high schools who enroll in college the following fall semester do so at a two-year public institution (NSC, 2015a). Given the key role community colleges play in providing



postsecondary education to students with significant financial needs, simply tracking the rate of enrollment from high school to college does not capture the nuances in community college progress and completion.

The persistence rate is the percentage of students who continue their postsecondary education at any institution for their second year, while the retention rate is the percentage of students who return to the same institution. The distinction between persistence and retention is especially critical in investigating graduation and enrollment patterns among community college students, since part of the mission of community colleges is to prepare students for transfer to a four-year institution.

Overall, persistence rates are higher than retention rates, especially for community college students. The most recent persistence and retention Snapshot Report showed that

the overall persistence rate for community colleges had rebounded from a brief post-recession decline (NSC, 2016b). For students who started college at two-year public institutions in fall 2014, the persistence rate was 60 percent. In other words, one year after entering community college, six out of 10 students had either enrolled at the original institution (retained), transferred to a different four- or two-year institution (persisted), or completed a postsecondary degree or certificate (see Figure 1).

## Transfer and Mobility

*Of all students who began college at two-year public institutions in fall 2008, 24.4 percent transferred to four-year institutions within six years (vertical transfer) and 15.0 percent transferred to two-year institutions (lateral transfer) for an overall transfer rate of 39.6 percent.*

**Figure 1. First-Year Persistence and Retention Rates for Students Who Started College at Two-Year Public Institutions**



Read the report at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/Snapshotreport-persistenceandretention22/>

In the Clearinghouse Signature Report investigating the transfer and mobility patterns of postsecondary students (2015b), it was found that almost 40 percent of students who began at two-year institutions eventually transferred to another two- or four-year institution within six years (Figure 2). Additionally, over 36 percent of community college students transferred before earning a postsecondary credential. The results also indicated that approximately 24 percent of community college students transferred to a four-year institution, whereas 15 percent of students transferred to another two-year institution.

The results also showed that over 17 percent of students who began their postsecondary education at a four-year institution had transferred to a two-year institution. This represented nearly half of all four-year institution transfers, which indicates that

**community colleges not only support pathways to a four-year degree for students who began at a community college, but also for those who began at a four-year institution.**

One of the strengths of Clearinghouse data is the ability to track transfer destination schools as well as the state into which students transfer. Specifically, colleges are unable to track their students once they transfer out of their institution, and states are unable to track their students once they transfer out of their state. Unfortunately, many transfer students become inaccurately labeled as drop-outs, which negatively impacts college- and state-level funding. Clearinghouse data are able to fill these reporting gaps by monitoring mobility patterns within and across state lines. These figures are especially important to take into consideration for community colleges, given

**Figure 2. Destination of First Transfer or Mobility by Sector and Control of Starting Institution, Fall 2008 Cohort**



Read the report at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport9/>

that over 36 percent of students who begin at a two-year institution transfer out before achieving an associate degree (NSC, 2015b). Further, of the students who transfer out, over 19 percent transfer out of state, resulting in postsecondary outcomes that go unreported in many state longitudinal data systems.

Overall, **the transfer and mobility patterns among community college students underscore the importance of tracking enrollment across different institutions and across state lines.**

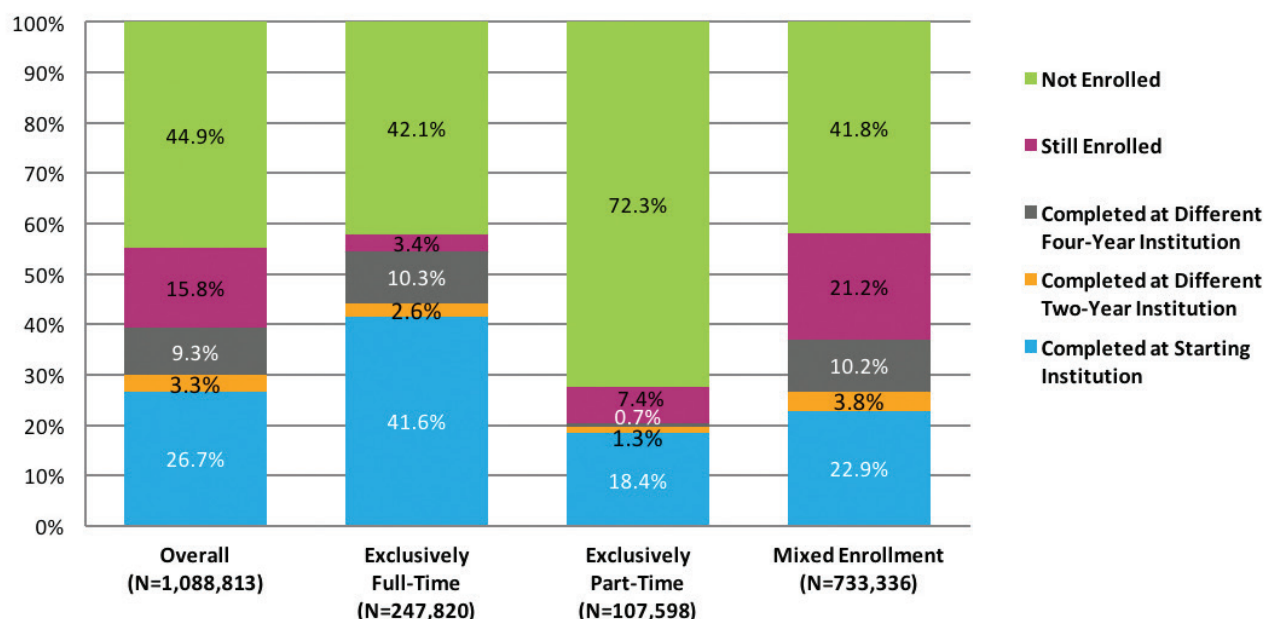
## Certificate and Degree Completion

*Of all students who began college at a two-year public institution in 2010, 30 percent completed their first certificate or degree at a two-year institution and 9.3 percent completed their first certificate or degree at a four-year institution, for an overall completion rate of 39.32 percent.*

A traditionally used measure of postsecondary academic success is whether or not students complete a postsecondary credential. In the 2016 Signature Report on completion rates, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that 30 percent of the fall 2010 entering cohort of community college students completed their first credential within six years at either the initial institution where they were enrolled or from a different two-year college, with another 9.3 percent completing their first credential at a four-year institution (NSC, 2016c). Almost 45 percent of exclusively full-time students graduated with an associate degree (Figure 3).

Community colleges support a variety of non-traditional pathways to four-year degree completion. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has developed additional metrics that provide a more holistic understanding of the contributions made by two-year institutions. For example, in 2015, the Research Center

**Figure 3. Six-Year Outcomes and First Completion for Students Who Started at Two-Year Public Institutions by Enrollment Intensity (N=1,088,813)**



Read the report at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12/>

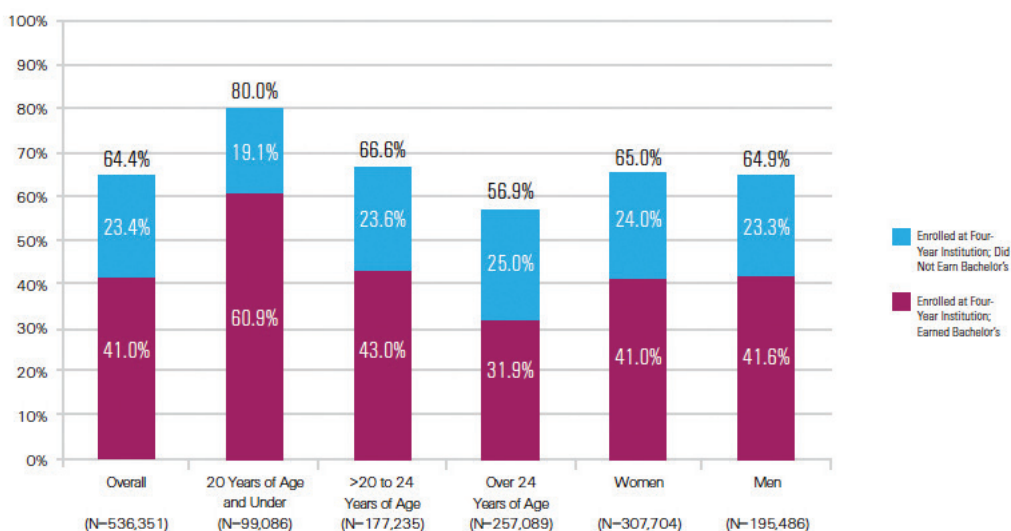
released a Snapshot Report on the contributions of two-year institutions to four-year degree completions (NSC, 2015c). It revealed that approximately 46 percent of 2013-14 bachelor's degree earners had previously enrolled at a two-year institution. The results varied by state, showing that 70 percent of four-year graduates in Texas, for example, were enrolled at a two-year institution at some point prior to graduation. Overall, these results indicated that **almost half of all bachelor's degree recipients were at one point enrolled at a community college before transferring to a four-year institution.**

In addition to examining community college enrollment patterns prior to earning a four-year degree, the Research Center has also reported on the enrollment patterns after degree attainment. For example, in a Snapshot Report investigating the associate-to-bachelor's pathway, it was found that 64 percent of 2009-10 associate degree earners went on to enroll in a four-year institution within the next six years and over 40 percent

earned bachelor's degrees (NSC, 2016d; Figure 4). This suggests that the majority of associate degree earners intend to earn a bachelor's degree, especially for those who earned their associate degree when they were 20 years old or younger. Associate degree earners in this age group displayed the highest bachelor's degree completion rate at 61 percent. Overall, 80 percent of the 20 years old and younger age group enrolled in a four-year institution within six years of completing their associate's degree.

In addition to the degree pathways Snapshot Report, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center also released a yearly success and progress rate Snapshot Report (NSC, 2016e) detailing the persistence and retention, as well as completion patterns, of a single cohort of community college students across time. Figure 5 shows the enrollment and completion patterns of the 2009-10 entering cohort of first-time, full-time community college students across six academic years. Beyond year four, the rate at which students graduate from a transfer

**Figure 4. Bachelor's Degree Outcomes for Students Who Earned an Associate Degree in 2009-10 as First Postsecondary Credential**



*Note: Based on students whose first postsecondary credential was an associate degree earned between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2010. Student age refers to the age when first credential was awarded. Subsequent credentials are limited to credentials completed within six years of first credential award date.*

Read the report at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/Snapshotreport-certificateassociatedegreepathways23/>



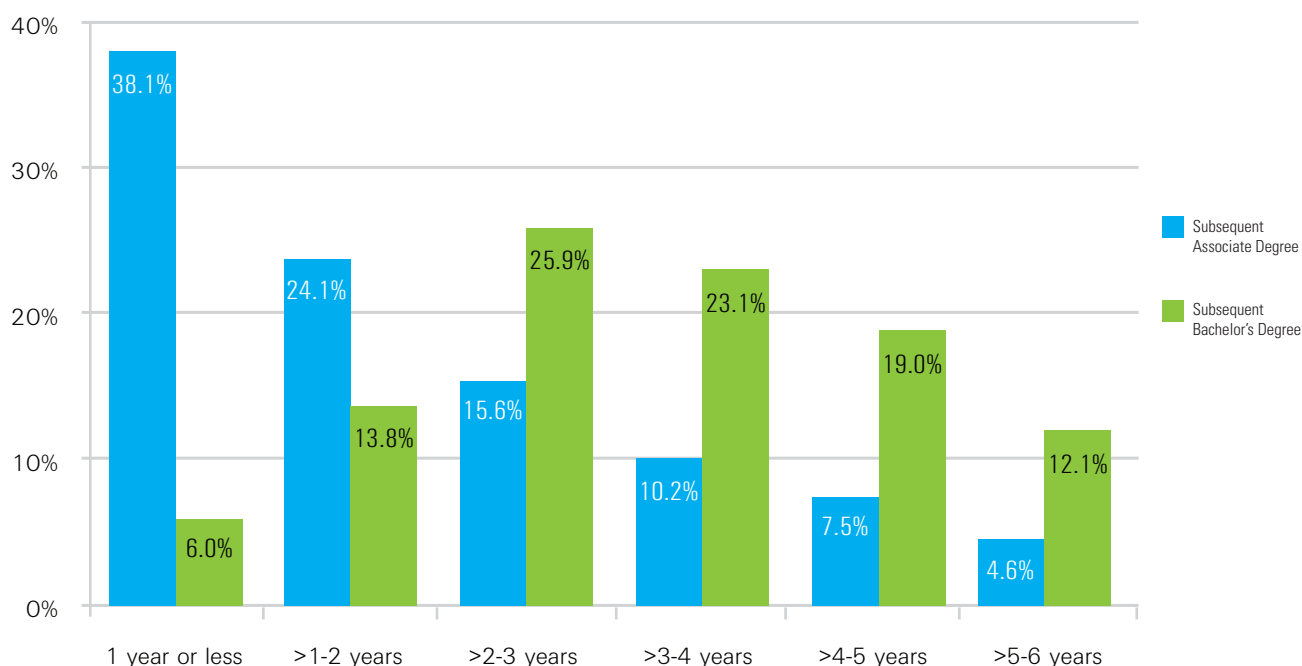
institution began to grow faster than the rate at which students graduate from the original institution.

In addition to the outcome patterns, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has also investigated the amount of time required for students to complete a degree (NSC, 2016f). In the most recent Signature Report, time-to-degree was defined in two ways: time enrolled and time elapsed. Time enrolled was defined in terms of the number of weeks equivalent to one academic year (30 weeks) of active, full-time enrollment. For example, four semesters of full-time enrollment would be equivalent to two academic years of enrollment, whereas four semesters of half-time enrollment would be equivalent to one year of enrollment. Time elapsed was defined as the total time, in calendar years, between initial enrollment in a postsecondary institution and subsequent degree attainment, regardless of whether or not the student was actually enrolled. The

results revealed that individuals who earned an associate's degree between July 2014 and June 2015 were actively enrolled in a two-year degree program for an average of 3.4 years before graduating. Average time elapsed was 5.6 years, suggesting that community college students complete an average of 3.4 years of full-time coursework before graduating in a little over five years. **These results continue to highlight the importance of considering multiple measures of academic success when investigating postsecondary community college student outcomes.**

Overall, community college data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicate that there is a complex relationship between persistence, transfer, and graduation. Research from the National Student Clearinghouse regarding community college student pathway and outcome patterns illustrate the need for policymakers and education administrators to take a more varied approach in determining community

**Figure 5. Yearly Success and Progress: Two-Year Public Institutions**



Read the report at <https://nscresearchcenter.org/Snapshotreport-yearlysuccessandprogressrates20/>

college effectiveness. Given the diversity of community colleges in terms of the roles they play and the services they provide, the metrics used to assess their effectiveness must be updated to include more than just the graduation rate of first-time, full-time students. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is able to meet assessment needs by tracking student persistence and retention, transfer and mobility, and ultimately, two- and four-year degree outcomes. ■

### **About the National Student Clearinghouse® Research Center™**

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is the research arm of the National Student Clearinghouse. The Research Center collaborates with higher education institutions, states, school districts, high schools, and educational organizations as part of a national effort to better inform education leaders and policymakers. Through accurate longitudinal data outcomes reporting, the Research Center enables better educational policy decisions leading to improved student outcomes.

Read our Research Center reports  
<https://nscresearchcenter.org>

### **About the Clearinghouse's StudentTracker® Research Service**

Community colleges, and other institutions and educational organizations, can use our StudentTracker service to query the Clearinghouse's national postsecondary database to obtain continuing enrollment and degree information on their students.

Learn about StudentTracker  
[www.studenttracker.org](http://www.studenttracker.org)

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