

Lingerers in the Community College

By Xiaotao Ran and Sung-Woo Cho

Many community college students fail to graduate. Even among those students who enroll for a substantial period of time and who earn a significant number of college credits, many fail to complete an award. To improve completion rates in community colleges, administrators may want to focus attention on this group of students we call “lingerers.” Compared with other students, such as those who drop out early in their college careers, lingerers demonstrate persistence and a strong intention to complete a college program, yet they do not earn an award. This result is costly both for the students and the colleges they attend. In this analysis, we examine the following questions: What are the characteristics of lingerers in community college? How do their course-taking behaviors differ from those of students who complete an award? What prevents them from completing?

Our analysis is based on extensive unit record data on cohorts of students at nine community colleges in three states. The data include information on student demographics, course enrollment and performance, credential completion, and transfer. We track students for up to five academic years.

The data used in this analysis are from the 2005–06 first-time-in-college (FTIC) student cohort at these nine colleges. Credit students (i.e., those students who either placed into or enrolled in developmental education or those who either placed into or enrolled in college-level coursework) constituted 36 percent of the full FTIC sample. We limit our study to this subset of credit students in order to restrict our analysis to students who were mostly likely to earn an award or transfer to a four-year college. As a result, the full sample used in our analysis is 27,713 students.

We define lingerers as students in the sample who completed 30 or more college-level semester credits and were still enrolled in the same community college in their fifth year but who had not yet earned a credential. About 9 percent of students in our sample were lingerers. We also make comparisons with “completers,” students who earned an associate degree at the community college within five years. About 6 percent of students in our sample were completers.

Lingerers demonstrate persistence and a strong intention to complete a college program, yet they do not earn an award.

DEFINITIONS

LINGERERS

Students who completed 30 or more college-level credits and were still enrolled in their fifth year but had not yet earned a credential.

COMPLETERS

Students who earned an associate degree within five years.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the full sample of credit students, lingerers, and completers. Lingerers tended to be younger than credit students and about the same age as

degree completers. Lingerers were slightly less likely to be Black and more likely to be Hispanic than credit students, and they were slightly less likely to be White than completers. Lingerers, like credit students generally, had modestly lower median household incomes than completers. Notwithstanding these small differences, lingerers appear to have been roughly similar to both credit students and degree completers in terms of ethnicity, age, and median household income.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

	LINGERERS (%)	ASSOCIATE DEGREE COMPLETERS (%)	CREDIT STUDENTS (%)
RACE / ETHNICITY			
White	43	49	43
Black	16	13	21
Hispanic	34	31	29
Other	7	8	8
AGE CATEGORY			
19 and under	74	75	66
20–23	10	8	12
24–26	3	4	5
27 and older	13	13	18
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME			
1 (lowest)	13	10	14
2	12	13	14
3	18	17	16
4	22	27	22
5 (highest)	35	34	35
TOTAL STUDENTS	2,531	1,585	27,713

Preparation, Enrollment Status, and Intent

How well-prepared for college were lingerers? What were their enrollment intensity characteristics? And were their academic intentions very different from other students? Compared with completers, lingerers needed more developmental education and were more likely to attend college part-time, but they had similar education goals.

The vast majority (83 percent) of lingerers were referred to developmental education when they began college, slightly greater than the 76 percent of completers who were so referred. And only 10 percent of lingerers were tested as college-ready in all three subject areas—math, English, and reading—compared with 17 percent of students who went on to earn an associate degree, suggesting that lingerers were less prepared academically than completers. (An additional 7 percent of both lingerers and completers, about whom we have no placement information, enrolled in college-level courses.)

In addition, only about half of lingerers started their first term as full-time students, compared with about 60 percent of completers who enrolled full-time in the first term. For each of the subsequent spring and fall semesters, the part-time enrollment rate for lingerers was at least 10 percentage points higher than that for associate degree completers. Lingerers may thus have earned credits more slowly than completers because of their greater part-time enrollment.

Academic intent is an important attribute, because students who intend to earn a degree may, for example, have very different goals and course-taking behaviors than those who attend college for professional enrichment or other reasons. Yet our findings show that the general aspirations of lingerers were similar to those of completers. We have data on intent for most students in the sample. The intent categories include: earning a vocational certificate or degree, transferring to a four-year college, or improving skills

for a job or career. A total of 94 percent of lingerers indicated that they wanted to either receive an award at the community college (35 percent) or transfer to a four-year college (59 percent), which is slightly higher than the combined figure for completers—90 percent (44 percent of completers wanted to receive an award at the community college, and 46 percent wanted to transfer to a four-year college). While it is true that a greater proportion of lingerers than completers wanted to transfer than earn an award, in broad terms the data suggest that, like completers, the overwhelming majority of lingerers wanted to either earn a certificate or associate degree or transfer to a four-year college to eventually earn a bachelor's degree.

Major Declaration

Lingerers and associate degree completers were very similar in terms of their declared major. Around 80 percent of all credit students reported a major during the first term in which they enrolled. More than 60 percent of lingerers indicated that they majored in one of the Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) programs. Majoring in an LAS program often suggests that a student is interested in eventually transferring to a four-year college, as the majority of the courses in these programs usually fulfill some type of core curriculum requirement. Allied health, business, and engineering and science technology were the three most popular Career Technical Education (CTE) programs among lingerers, with 16 percent, 7 percent, and 5 percent of lingerers majoring in each, respectively.

Associate degree completers had fairly similar major declarations, except that completers were slightly less likely than lingerers to report an LAS major (54 percent). As for CTE programs, allied health (16 percent), engineering and science technology (9 percent), and business (7 percent) were the most popular programs among completers.

Credit Attempt and Attainment

Lingerers by definition earned a substantial number of college-level credits; on average they earned about 57 college-level credits. Associate degree completers earned about 82 credits. Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of college-level credits attempted and accumulated, respectively, at the end of five years for lingerers and associate degree completers. The distributions of the number of college-level credits *attempted* by each group (Figure 1) are quite similar, but the distributions of the number of credits that each group *earned* (Figure 2) are starkly different. The gap in the average number of college-level credits attempted is equivalent to about four courses (78 credits for lingerers versus 90 credits for completers); this is much smaller than the gap in the average number of college-level credits earned. What is more, like associate degree completers, lingerers attempted the great majority of their courses within a single program. This suggests that lingerers were not meandering and taking an assortment of courses that did not fulfill requirements for a degree; rather, they were simply failing their courses at higher rates than those students who went on to complete a credential.

On average, lingerers failed 25 percent of the courses they enrolled in; associate degree completers failed only 10 percent of their courses. In terms of gatekeeper (first college-level) courses, the average lingerer performed worse than even the average credit student. This pattern suggests that difficulty in passing courses is one of the major obstacles preventing lingerers from getting a degree.

Figure 3 shows the number of college-level credits earned each year by lingerers and completers over five years. Associate degree completers accumulated substantially more credits than lingerers in each of the first three years of enrollment. Passing more courses early on allowed completers to enter a program sooner, which in turn gave them a better chance of completing a degree quickly. While lingerers earned fewer credits than completers early on, it is worth noting that lingerers demonstrate a remarkable consistency in the number of credits they earned in each year of enrollment.

Figure 1. College-Level Credits Attempted at the End of 5 Years

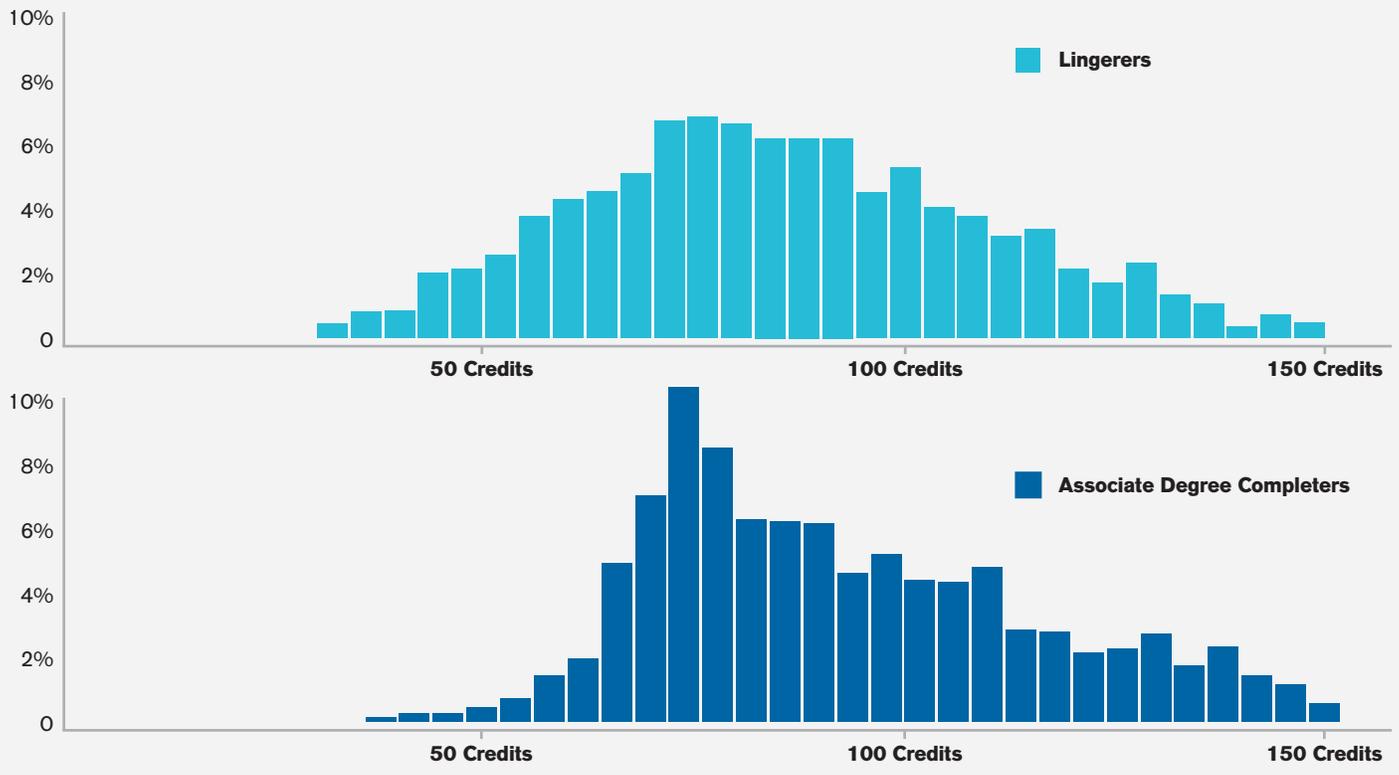


Figure 2. College-Level Credits Earned at the End of 5 Years

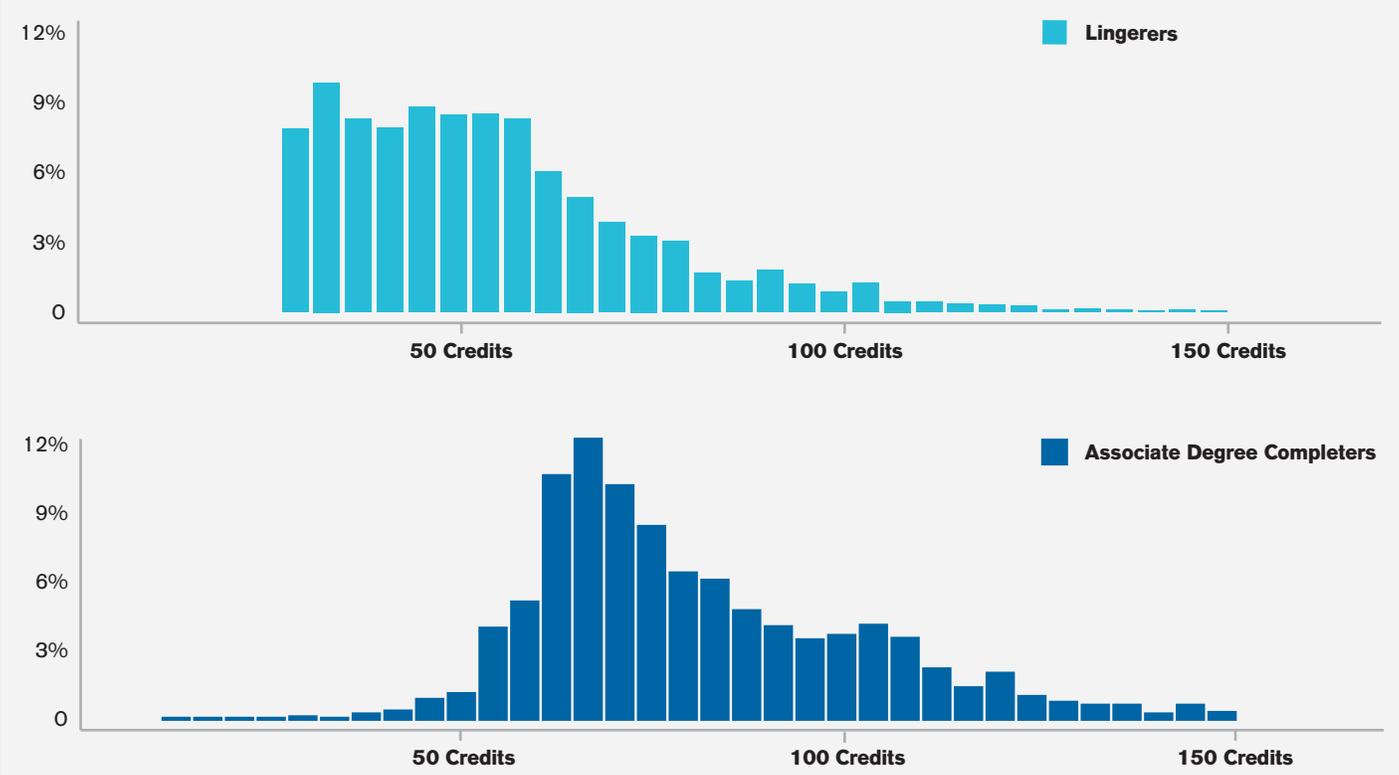
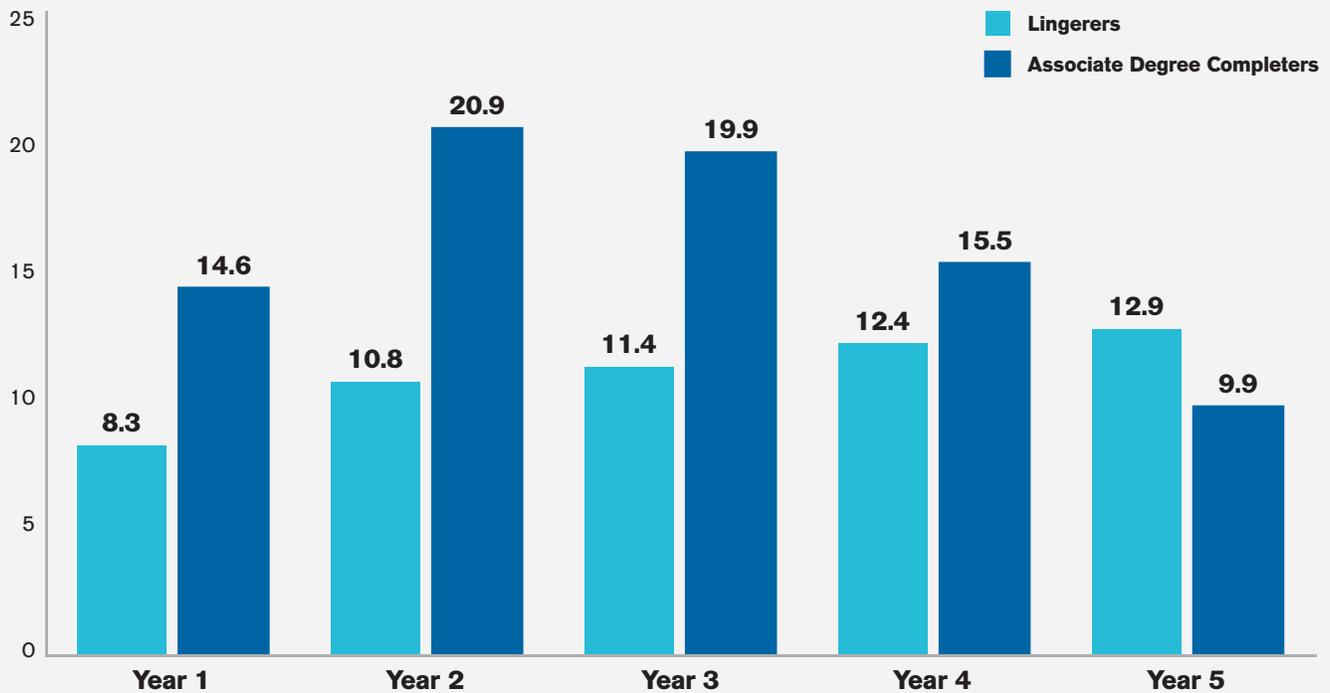


Figure 3. College-Level Credits Earned in Each Academic Year

Developmental Coursework

The need to fulfill developmental education requirements also contributed to the slower early accumulation of college-level credits among lingerers. As we have shown, lingerers had a higher developmental course referral rate. It is no surprise, then, that lingerers completed more developmental credits than completers. Lingers earned, on average, 12 developmental credits (equivalent to the completion of about four courses), compared with only 6 developmental credits for associate degree completers.

In a recent study, Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez (2012) found that a primary effect of remediation is diversionary—developmental students tend to take remedial courses instead of college-level courses. This effect, which appears to apply in the current analysis, delays students' college-level course-taking. The time that lingerers spend in remedial courses postpones their entry into a college-level program and delays degree completion.

Conclusion

Lingers are a highly persistent group of community college students who have accumulated a substantial number of college credits and are still enrolled in the fifth year. Yet, for all their efforts, they have not earned a credential, which would be beneficial for them in the labor market. Our analysis shows that while lingerers in our sample shared similar demographic characteristics with those students who eventually received an associate degree, lingerers were more likely to attend part-time and to be referred to and enroll in remedial courses. They also failed a greater proportion of their college-level courses than degree completers. We find that while lingerers did take courses that led to a degree, they did not take the final steps toward completion by finishing their coursework.

Having many students who enroll term after term but who do not complete a degree is costly for community colleges, many of which are seeking to improve completion rates and efficiency. Colleges may therefore want to undertake similar analyses of their own student lingerers. Doing so may illustrate the need to offer more effective supports to students who have demonstrated a strong effort to succeed but who have not yet earned a college credential.

References

Scott-Clayton, J., & Rodriguez, O. (2012). *Development, discouragement, or diversion? New evidence on the effects of college remediation* (NBER Working Paper No. 18328). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Funding for this research was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.