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New Reports Offer First State-by-State Analysis on Whether Community College Students from All Backgrounds Transfer to Four-Year Institutions and Earn Bachelor's Degrees

Reports Outline Opportunities for States to Fix Transfer Systems Failing Most Community College Students, Including Low-Income, Older, Black, and Hispanic Students

Washington D.C. – New higher education data released today shows that across the United States, only about a third of students starting in community colleges transfer to four-year schools, and only 16% earn a bachelor's degree within six years. The study is the first of its kind to aggregate transfer rates and outcomes by student subgroup, finding that low-income (11%), older (6%), Black (9%), and Hispanic (13%) students transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at even lower rates than students overall.

The two companion reports—one focused on community colleges and the other on four-year institutions—are a call to action to improve ineffective and inefficient transfer pathways in higher education. Each report offers a state-by-state breakdown of transfer outcomes as well as recommendations to improve transfer practices and bachelor's degree attainment rates.

The study finds that one year after transferring, students who came from a community college are more likely to be retained at their new school than students who transfer from other four-year institutions (81% vs 66%). However, despite the promise that students can graduate after spending two years at community college and two years at a four-year institution, only 18% of students complete a bachelor's within two years of transferring.

“Too many students are failed by policies and practices that dictate whether and how effectively students transfer from community colleges to universities, particularly students from historically underserved groups,” said Tatiana Velasco, lead author of the reports and Research Associate at the Community College Research Center (CCRC). “We hope that states, systems, college leaders, and practitioners see in this report a reason to improve those outcomes, to help more students from all backgrounds succeed in transferring and attaining the bachelor's degrees that will advance their knowledge and career prospects—while helping employers address their talent needs.”

Read both reports: [“Tracking Transfer: Community College and Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor’s Degree Attainment,”](#) released by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University; the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program; and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

“These reports demonstrate how current transfer pathways are ineffective for most students and not improving fast enough to deliver the bachelor’s degrees most community college students aim to achieve,” said Tania LaViolet, Director of Research & Innovation at the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. The data we analyzed show that there are some high-performing community colleges and four-year institutions that achieve strong results for all students, including those from underserved groups. We are currently researching those colleges to gather insights that can help other institutions improve transfer outcomes.”

The reports provide a breakdown of transfer outcomes across all 50 states for students overall, as well as by student income, race, age, ethnicity, and gender.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Nearly 40% of the nation’s undergraduate students are enrolled in community colleges. The study found that one in five students starting at a public four-year university have transferred from a community college, and community college transfers are more likely to be low- and middle-income, Black, Hispanic, and older than students who start at a four-year institution.

Despite surveys indicating that nearly 80% of community college students aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree, the study finds that only about a third (33%) of community college students transfer to a four-year institution, and fewer than half (48%) of those who transfer earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of community college entry (totaling 16% of community college students). The research shows that these rates are even lower for populations underrepresented among bachelor’s degree holders, including low-income, male, Black, and Hispanic students.

“Understanding how different groups of community college students are doing once they transfer to a four-year institution is crucial for improving outcomes for these students,” said John Fink, Senior Research Associate and Program Lead at CCRC. “These reports make clear that community colleges and their four-year partners need to implement the strategies we know work to help transfer students succeed.”

The two reports find only modest progress over the past seven years. CCRC and Aspen released a 2016 study that found that 14% of community college students transferred to and graduated from a four-year institution within six years; the new community college report shows that the rate has only improved to 16%. The two new reports also outline comprehensive state-by-state data on transfer outcomes and identify important trends, including:

- States with the largest share of community college students who are low-income, Black, or older have bachelor’s completion rates for these students well below the national average.

- States with the greatest improvement in transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment include North Carolina, West Virginia, New Mexico, and South Dakota.
- Transfer outcomes have stagnated or show little improvement in most states.

Complete state-by-state data can be found [here](#)

The reports identify strategies for community college leaders, four-year institution leaders, and state policymakers to consider to improve transfer practices and completion, including:

- Expanding dual enrollment opportunities and practices to increase transfer outcomes for all students, including underserved groups, given the report’s finding of a strong positive correlation between dual enrollment participation and transfer/bachelor’s attainment.
- Heightening focus on timely bachelor’s completion after transferring from community college to reduce cost and accelerate entry into a job after graduating.
- Promoting associate degree completion prior to transfer, consistent with the strong correlation, consistent with the report’s finding of a strong positive correlation with bachelor’s degree attainment rates.
- Encouraging and supporting more transfers to selective four-year institutions and discouraging transfer to for-profit institutions and primarily online institutions where bachelor’s attainment rates after transfer are lowest.

“This is a collective failure, so fixing the broken transfer system will require collective action,” said Tatiana Velasco. “Both four-year institutions and community colleges have important roles to play, as do state policymakers. They all must pay more attention to assessing whether transfer students succeed, understanding which student groups are best and least well served, and incentivizing solutions that will help more diverse students achieve their goals and support their families.”

More detailed findings and recommendations can be found here (and attached): <https://bit.ly/42lxc9P>

The full reports can be found here: <https://bit.ly/tracking-transfer>

State-by-state data can be found here: <https://bit.ly/4beRfei>

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The **Community College Research Center**, Teachers College, Columbia University, studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations.

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes, especially for the growing population of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds on American campuses. For more information, visit higher.aspeninstitute.org.

The **National Student Clearinghouse® Research Center™** is the research arm of the National Student Clearinghouse. The Research Center works with higher education institutions, states, districts, high schools, and educational organizations to better inform practitioners and policymakers about student educational pathways. Through accurate longitudinal data outcomes reporting, the Research Center enables better educational policy decisions leading to improved student outcomes.