

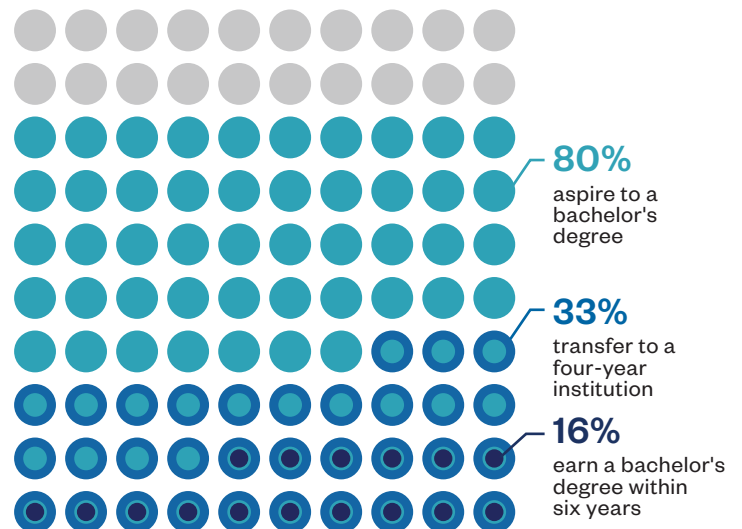
# Community College Transfer

Preparing students to transfer to a university and earn a bachelor's degree has long been a primary mission of community colleges. Four of every five entering community college students seek to transfer and earn at least a bachelor's degree—a credential that is increasingly needed to secure a good job with family-sustaining wages. Students may opt for this transfer pathway to a bachelor's degree because community colleges are more affordable and closer to home than four-year colleges.

## What the Research Tells Us

**Only a fraction of community college students who intend to transfer ever complete a bachelor's degree, and rates are even lower for low-income, older, male, Black, and Hispanic students.**

- Though about 80% of community college students aspire to a bachelor's degree, only 33% of them transfer to a four-year institution, and only 16% earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college.<sup>12</sup>
- In fall 2024, 52% of transfers came from the top two quintiles of neighborhood income and 27% came from the bottom two quintiles.<sup>3</sup> Only 11% of low-income community college students earn a bachelor's degree in six years.<sup>4</sup>
- About 9% of Black students, 13% of Hispanic students, and 6% of older students earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college.<sup>5</sup>



**The type of college that students transfer to may affect their outcomes.**

- At public four-year institutions, 57% of community college transfer students complete a bachelor's degree within four years after transferring. At private nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, 44% do so.<sup>6</sup>
- Only 23%–25% of transfer students at private for-profit and predominantly online institutions complete a bachelor's within four years of transferring. Black community college transfers are twice as likely as other students to enroll in these institutions.<sup>7</sup>

**Though the transfer pathway is nominally designed for full-time students to spend two years at a community college and two years at a four-year college, the paths to successful transfer in a chosen major are often unclear, and there can be many obstacles to successful transfer**

- Many students transfer more than once or stop out before transfer. Only 8% of successful community college transfer students follow the 2+2 sequence. Many students graduate after six years or longer.<sup>8</sup>

- A growing number of students attempt to transfer dual enrollment credits.<sup>9</sup> Former dual enrollment students transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at much higher rates than students without dual enrollment.<sup>10</sup>
- Many community college students who transfer lose credits and risk running out of financial aid benefits before earning a degree.<sup>11</sup>
- Transfer credit loss decreases students' chances of completing a bachelor's degree and adds extra time and cost for students who do complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>12 13</sup>
- Though early advising is important for successful transfer, many community college students don't have firm transfer plans and are not aware of advising resources.<sup>14</sup> Half of students who intend to transfer do not use transfer advising services.<sup>15</sup>
- Sixty-seven percent of transfer students who complete a pre-transfer community college award, such as an associate degree, graduate within four years of transferring, compared with 42% of students without a pre-transfer award.<sup>16</sup>
- Four-year college policies may not account for the needs of transfer students, creating obstacles to course registration, financial aid, housing, and more.<sup>17</sup> Transfer students can be excluded from institutional aid, scholarships, and co-curricular opportunities, such as undergraduate research and leadership development.<sup>18</sup>

**Community colleges are working with states and four-year colleges to create more efficient transfer pathways to improve graduation rates and economic mobility and support transfer enrollments at four-year colleges.**

- Community college transfer pathways are a major source of enrollments and diversity at four-year institutions.<sup>19</sup>
- Many community colleges and their four-year partners have created structured transfer pathways by major to smooth transfer and minimize lost credits.<sup>20</sup>
- More than 30 states require four-year institutions to accept a core of general education courses or courses fulfilling an associate degree to transfer as a block. Other states have developed common course numbering.<sup>21</sup>

## Policy Considerations

- State policymakers should use data on transfer and bachelor's completion rates, broken down by student group and college, to identify critical areas for improvement.<sup>22</sup>
- States and systems should support colleges' work on the creation of structured transfer pathways to promote timely bachelor's completion within a major and the tailoring of transfer advising supports to foster student trust, engagement, and effective planning.<sup>23</sup>
- Four-year institutions should assume a more proactive role in creating transfer partnerships with community colleges that provide students with credit transferability, advising, and other supports.<sup>24</sup> Four-year institutions receiving community college transfer students should be held accountable when not delivering for their students.<sup>25</sup>
- Community colleges and states should further explore and expand the potential of dual enrollment to improve transfer outcomes of underserved students.<sup>26</sup>

## Endnotes

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