AACC Statement on the Report of the National Student Clearinghouse on Transfer and Mobility at Postsecondary Institutions

Community colleges have long been regarded as the great access point in American higher education. Data just released by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) show that these institutions are also the preferred destination for the more than 32% of all new college students who subsequently enroll in another institution of higher education.

The data released today are dramatic, although they reflect patterns witnessed for some time by many community colleges. NSC reports that 51.9% of all students who transfer from 4-year public institutions do so to a community college. Moreover, 41.4% of all students who transfer from 4-year nonprofit colleges subsequently enroll at a community college.

Ironically, students from all sectors in higher education are most likely to transfer into a community college, with the exception of community college students, who most frequently transfer to 4-year public institutions (41.2%). However, nearly as many students who start at a community college, 37.6%, subsequently enroll in another community college.

Indeed, this “lateral transfer” is widespread across higher education. The NSC data indicate that, of those students who transfer, 34.5% of students starting at 4-year public institutions and 20.2% of students starting at 4-year private nonprofit institutions reenter the same type of institution.

The NSC data draw from the fall 2006 cohort, examining the behavior of those who had transferred over a 5-year period ending with the 2010–2011 academic year. They cover some 2.8 million students, both part- and full-time, and examine transfer behavior across state lines, which is a shortcoming of many state data systems. The NSC data cover initial transfers; some students will transfer several times.

Students who had previously earned a credential were excluded and will be the focus of a future NSC report. This report will likely underscore the frequency with which those already possessing a college credential enroll in community colleges. According to Department of Education data, in 2007–2008, 26.4% of all community college students had earned a credential at a college. Eight percent of those students held a bachelor’s degree.

The report reinforces the notion of higher education as a "swirl," but the general direction of that movement appears to be toward community colleges. There are numerous reasons for this behavior, including cost, curricular offerings, and proximity.

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