

Recent National Community College Enrollment and Award Completion Data

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Introduction

National community college enrollments continue to decrease. Given the importance of these trends to AACC member institutions—understanding that local changes are ultimately what matters—AACC is providing this report to discuss some of the latest data. It also examines the completion rates that were released along with the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) enrollment data, comparing them to the much more accurate data produced by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). The NSC studies reveal a much higher rate of community college success than is often perceived.

Highlighted in the report is the following information:

- There is agreement that enrollment at community colleges nationwide declined by more than 3% between fall 2011 and fall 2012; NSC data show similar decline in fall 2013.
- The decrease in enrollment of students over the age of 24 has been much higher than younger students for the past 3 years, reaching 6% in fall 2013.
- The NSC completion rate that tracks all students for 6 years across institutions shows that 40% of community college students completed their program—almost double the official graduation rate (21%) used by ED, which measures for the starting institution the percent of full-time, first-time students starting in the fall who completed their program within 3 years.
- The NSC graduation rate for full-time students increases to about 58%, or nearly three times the official ED graduation rate.

Trends in Community College Enrollment

Two recent reports confirm that the trend in recent years in the decline in enrollment in postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, does not appear to have reversed course. In December 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U. S. Department of Education, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center issued reports on fall enrollment, (*Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2012*; *Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year*

2012; *Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 2004-09*); and (*Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2012* (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013183.pdf>) and *Term Enrollment Estimates Fall 2013*) (<http://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2013.pdf>), respectively. Using different data, these reports confirm what many campus heads know—that enrollment at their institution continues to drop off.

As stated, the NCES and NSC reports are different, and they have different virtues: the former is more comprehensive and the latter is more current.

According to the NCES report, the enrollment at 2-year public institutions decreased by nearly 3.9% between fall 2011 and fall 2012, which is very similar to the 3.1% decrease using NSC data for the same time period. Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that the information captured by NSC regarding the change in enrollment between fall 2012 and fall 2013 is accurate; it shows another decrease of 3.1%. The continued decrease in enrollment at community colleges over the past 3 years bucks the trend of a slowing decline of enrollment at institutions overall and recent enrollment increases at 4-year public institutions.

Because NSC also reports more current enrollment counts, as well as spring counts, it is a more useful source for trend information than IPEDS. Fall 2010 was the last time that community colleges saw an increase, albeit a small one, in enrollment. Since then, community colleges have experienced year-to-year decreases in enrollment, the largest between fall 2010 and spring 2011. During the last 12-month period between fall 2012 and fall 2013, the enrollment decrease at community colleges has held steady at around 3% (Table 1).

NSC examined the percent change in fall enrollment for two student attributes—gender and age—as well as enrollment intensity—part-time vs. full-time attendance. As table below indicates, the annual decrease in the enrollment of men has been fairly steady, around 2%, whereas the decrease of enrolled women has been more precipitous, from a decline of about 1% between fall 2010 and 2011 up to a 4% decrease in the most recent reporting period between fall 2012 and 2013.

Similarly, the decrease in the enrollment of students 24 and younger has remained steady around 1%, while the decrease for students over the age of 24 has been more drastic, more than doubling between fall 2011 and 2013 (Table 2). This could be a result of the slightly brightening economy allowing older students, many of whom were probably employed previously, to return to the workforce.

There is less of a definite pattern for the changes in enrollment by the intensity of attendance. For the years between fall 2010 and 2012, the percent decrease in enrollment of full-time students was almost twice as large as the decrease between fall 2012 and 2013, 5.3% versus 2.9%. The reverse trend is apparent for part-time students. Between 2010 and 2011, there was an increase in part-time enrollment of 1.2%, whereas for the following 2 years there has been a steady decrease from 1.2% to 3.3%. Between 2010 and 2012, the percent decrease in full-time enrollment was much higher than the change in part-time enrollment. However, the change in the

last year, between 2012 and 2013, shows a percent decrease that is similar for both groups, 2.9% for full-time and 3.3% for part-time students (Table 2).

Student Attainment/Graduation Rates—What the Data Tell

As is widely acknowledged, the Department of Education's official graduation rate is a poor measure of student completion, especially for community colleges. The graduation rate only counts fall-enrolled, full-time, first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students that graduate from the same institution within 150% of normal program completion time. The majority of community college students attend part-time, many are not first-time students, and some are not degree- or certificate-seeking. Moreover, a large percent do not enroll in the fall and intend on, and later do, transfer to another institution. AACC strongly urges Congress to change this calculation when it reauthorizes the Higher Education Act.

Table 1. Changes in Fall Enrollment at Public 4-Year and 2-Year Institutions

	Total Fall Enrollment		4-Year Public Institutions		2-Year Public Institutions	
	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC
Change from Prior Year Fall 2011	-0.1%	0.2%	1.6%	1.4%	-2.2%	-1.6%
Change from Prior Year Fall 2012	-1.9%	-1.8%	0.6%	-0.6%	-3.9%	-3.1%
Change from Prior Year Fall 2013		-1.5%		0.3%		-3.1%

Table 2. Changes in Fall Enrollment at Public 2-Year Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity

	Percent Change from Prior Year 2-Year Public Institutions					
	Gender		Age		Enrollment Intensity	
	Men	Women	24 and under	Over 24	Full-time	Part-time
Fall 2011	-2.0%	-1.3%	-0.9%	-2.5%	-5.3%	1.2%
Fall 2012	-2.4%	-3.6%	-1.6%	-5.2%	-5.7%	-1.2%
Fall 2013	-1.9%	-4.0%	-1.2%	-6.0%	-2.9%	-3.3%

For the most recent cohort of degree/certificate-seekers attending a 2-year public institution (cohort year 2009), the official graduation rate at 2-year public institutions is 21.2%. The rate is slightly higher for women (21.7%) than men (20.7%).

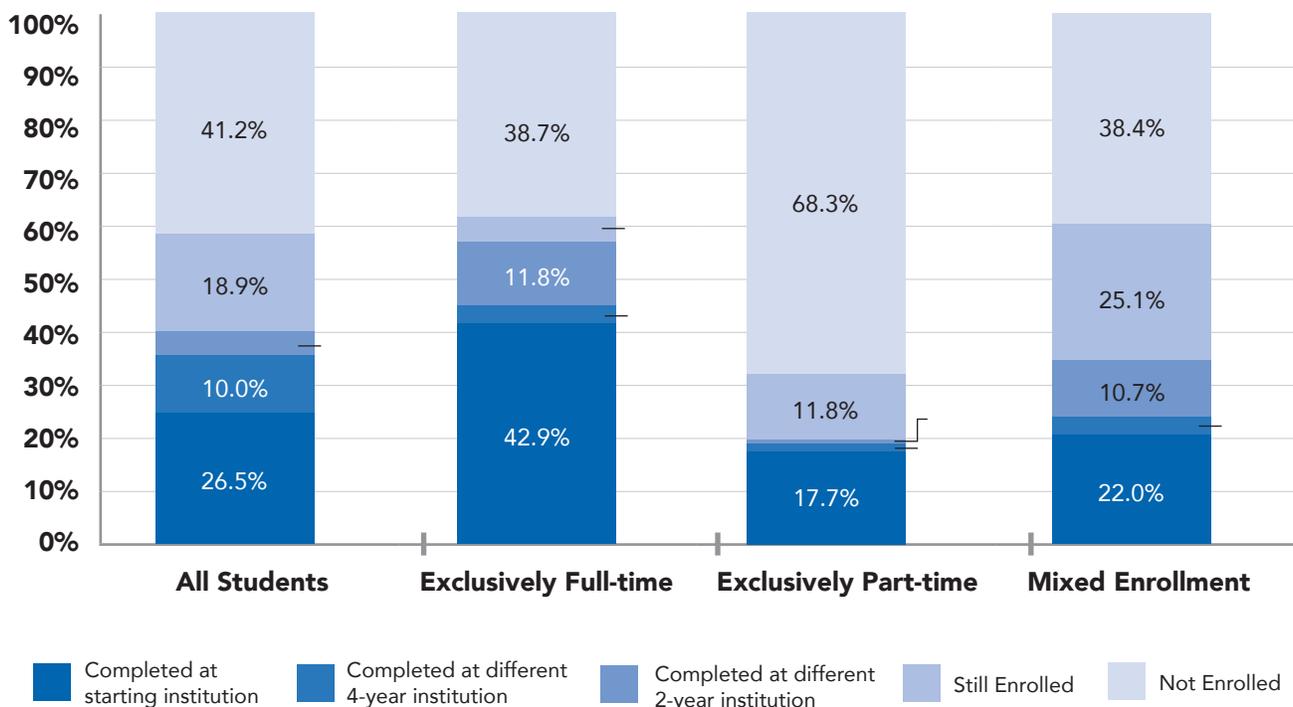
In addition to the 150% of normal program completion time, ED also tracks on-time and 200% of normal program completion time. To be able to measure the latter, an earlier cohort, 2008, needs to be used. The graduation rates for 2-year public colleges are as follows: 12.2% within 100% of normal program completion time; 22% for within 150% of normal program completion time; and, 27.5% of 200% of normal program completion time (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013183.pdf>).

NSC uses a different measure of college completion, which tracks students for a longer period of time and across institutions. The most recent NSC Signature Report, (*Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates – Fall 2007 Cohort*), (<http://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/>

[NSC_Signature_Report_6.pdf](#)) finds that the overall 6-year completion rate for students in the fall 2007 cohort who complete their program at the starting 2-year public institution is 26.5%.² An additional 3.4% complete at a different 2-year institution and 10% completed at a different 4-year institution. All told, 39.9% of the students who started at a community college completed the program either at the starting institution or a different institution within 6 years (Figure 1). The result of using this completion measure is almost doubling the official graduation rate published by ED. And an additional one fifth (18.9%) of the students at 2-year public institutions were still enrolled in a community college or 4-year institution after 6 years. (It is important to note that the NSC data are not cohort data, as in the case of IPEDS.)

The 6-year completion rate differed by student gender and age as follows: (1) women had a higher completion rate than men, 43.2% and 37.2%, respectively and (2) adult learners (those over age 24) had a higher completion rate than either those 20 or

Figure 1. Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started at a 2-Year Public Institution by Enrollment Intensity



younger or between 20 and 24, 30.4% compared to 26% and 20.9%, respectively (Figure 1).

Students whose enrollment was exclusively full-time had the highest completion rate at their starting institutions—42.9%. This is more than double the official NCES graduation rate that also only includes full-time students. The difference in the two rates is that NCES uses a 3-year specified time to graduation measure, whereas NSC uses a 6-year timeframe. Moreover, by including students who transfer to other institutions, the NSC graduation rate for full-time students increases to 57.6%, or nearly *three times* the official NCES graduation rate (Figure 1).

In contrast, the completion rate for exclusively part-time students was 19.9%, with 17.7% completing at their first institution. The completion rate for mixed enrollment students fell in between, at 36.5%, with 22% completing at their first institution (Figure 1).

Notes

¹ This is attributable to an increase in enrollment at private not-for-profit institutions, which is offset by a larger decrease in enrollment at private for-profit institutions and to a lesser extent at community colleges.

² In comparison, the official or three-year graduation rate for the 2007 cohort, which only measure first-time, full-time students who started in the fall 2007 and completed their program in 2010 was 19%. Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2010; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2010; and Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 2002-07, U.S. Department of Education, March 2012. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012280.pdf>