

Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data

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This is the third of a series of American Association of Community Colleges reports on national trends in community college enrollments. It finds that nationally community college enrollments continue to decrease. The report also examines graduation rates published by the U.S. Department of Education (based on institutional level reporting), as well as the National Student Clearinghouse's completion rates (based on student level data). The completion rates that track students across institutions show much higher community college success rates than the department's official graduation rates.

Introduction/Overview

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) release annual reports on higher education fall enrollment and student outcomes. Following a surge in enrollment for several years during the recession, in the most recent year, both sources document a continued decline in overall enrollment at community colleges as well as an uptick in enrollments in public 4-year institutions. Graduation rates have changed very little.

Major findings include:

- Both reports indicated a continued nationwide decline in community college enrollment, which began in 2011. The decrease in enrollment of older students has been the highest and the most consistent over the past 4 years.
- According to the NSC, more than 38% of all community college students earn a credential, while ED's official graduation rate is 22%. The NSC completion rate for full-time only students, which is the most comparable to ED's official graduation rate, is 55%, or two-and-a-half times higher than ED's. (The NSC tracks students for twice as long as ED—6 years rather than 3 years by ED, which represents 150% of the "normal time" to completion, as prescribed in statute.)

Trends in Community College Enrollment

Overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions continued its decline in the fall of 2015, largely due to enrollment decreases in for-profit and 2-year public institutions. Community colleges experienced the smallest decline in their enrollment in the past 4 years, while private for-profit 4-year institutions experienced

a much greater decline (13.7% just since the previous year).¹ The four-year decline follows a surge in enrollment at the height of the recession in 2008 and 2009. The increase in enrollment at public 2-year institutions outpaced the overall enrollment increase across all sectors of higher education.²

The more current fall NSC 2015 enrollment numbers indicate an easing of the decline in enrollment in the 2-year public sector, a stabilization of the enrollment in 4-year public institutions, and a sharp continued enrollment drop in private, for-profit institutions.³ The ED and NSC reports chart similar directions in the changes in enrollment; however, they differ somewhat in terms of the intensity of the ups and downs (Table 1).

Unlike ED, the NSC provides spring enrollment counts. During the 24-month period between fall 2012 and fall 2014, the drop in enrollment at community colleges has not fluctuated more than two percentage points, ranging between 2.4% in the past year and 4.4% the previous year. Even so, each year the decline in enrollment at 2-year public institutions has exceeded the overall postsecondary enrollment decline.

The NSC report tracks changes in enrollment along several variables, including age and gender of students and enrollment intensity. As Table 2 shows, the enrollment of students over the age of 24 has continued to decline at the highest rate compared to other students, although the decline is the lowest in 3 years.

As was the case last year, the decreases in enrollment are probably partially due to continuing economic improvement. Students who may have turned to community college to weather the recession may have returned to the workforce. In 2015, with the exception

Table 1: Changes in Fall Enrollment, 2012–2015

Change from Prior Year	Total Fall Enrollment		4-Year Public Institutions		2-Year Public Institutions	
	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC
Fall 2012	-1.9%	-1.8%	0.6%	-0.6%	-3.9%	-3.1%
Fall 2013	-1.4%	-1.5%	0.3%	0.3%	-2.4%	-3.1%
Fall 2014	-0.9%	-1.3%	1.7%	2.9%	-3.3%	-6.9%
Fall 2015		-1.7%		0.4%		-2.4%

Table 2: Percent Changes in NSC Fall Enrollment at 2-Year Public Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity, 2012–2015

Change from Prior Year	Gender		Age		Enrollment Intensity	
	Men	Women	24 and under	Over 24	Part-time	Full-time
Fall 2012	-2.9%	-4.1%	-2.1%	-5.7%	-1.7%	-6.2%
Fall 2013	-2.0%	-4.2%	-1.3%	-6.2%	-3.4%	-3.1%
Fall 2014	-4.6%	-4.2%	-2.4%	-7.6%	-3.6%	-5.6%
Fall 2015	-1.6%	-3.0%	-0.4%	-5.7%	-0.9%	-4.6%

of mining and logging, all the major industries experienced employment gains over the previous year.⁴ The fastest recovery occurred in construction, historically a male-dominated industry. However, other industries, including education and health services, which tend to be more female dominated, had the largest number of new jobs.

The nexus between employment and education is complicated. On the one hand, new jobs are being created and current jobs are opening up because of retirements, attracting people who otherwise might pursue higher education. On the other hand, some of the jobs may require the sort of education that motivates some to return to, or remain in, school. This phenomenon may well explain the overall leveling off of the decline in enrollment and surge in enrollments at some community colleges.

There is no widespread evidence that students are being drawn away from traditional 4-year colleges to

community colleges, but in the wake of the Tennessee Promise program, which offers free tuition at 2-year institutions, there seems to be movement away from 4-year institutions toward community colleges. While states are investing more in public higher education than in the previous few years since the recession⁵, spending is still short of pre-recession levels, which means tuitions are not likely to change much from the status quo.

Student Completion vs. Graduation Rates—Why the Discrepancy?

One of the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) top priorities in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) is adding to the official graduation rate a 300% of normal time to completion graduation rate for community colleges, including transfers. This change would more accurately measure community college student success.⁶ The current ED official graduation rate is 150% of normal

time to completion. This is a 3-year window for associate degree seekers and excludes transfers, and is an inadequate measure of community college student completion. To its credit, for the 2015–16 academic year, ED will add outcome measures for groups of students not included in the 150% graduation rate or the other reported graduation rates of on-time completion (100%) and the 200% rate. In addition to the official graduation rate for first-time, full-time students, the new outcome measures will track for 6 years and 8 years *part-time*, first-time and non-first-time students as well as full-time, non-first-time students.⁷ Until these new measures are published in 2017–18, the only graduation rates available from ED track completion for a maximum of 4 years for associate-degree seeking students (200%) who attend full time and have not previously enrolled in a postsecondary institution. It is well known that only a very small percentage of community college students fit this profile.

With that as context, for the most recent cohort of degree/certificate-seekers attending a 2-year public institution (cohort year 2010), the official graduation rate was 21.8%,⁸ virtually unchanged from the previous

year when it was 21.2%.⁹ The rate is slightly higher for women (22.3%) than men (21.3%).

ED also tracks on-time and 200% of normal program completion time in addition to the 150% rate, although all the other criteria such as full-time, first-time attendance apply. Compared to all other sectors, 2-year public institutions experienced the largest jump in graduation rates (more than double) by increasing the window from 2 years to 4 years. The on-time or 100% of normal time to completion graduation rate for 2-year public colleges was 11.3%, but increased to 26.7% in the 200% window (this calculation required using an earlier cohort of 2009).

Unlike the ED graduation rates, which are reported at the institutional level for up to 4 years at community colleges, the NSC tracks students for a 6-year period and across institutions. According to the NSC's completion report¹⁰ (Figure 1), the overall 6-year completion rate for students who started in the fall of 2009 at a 2-year public institution and completed there was 26%. An additional 3.2% completed at a different 2-year institution and 9% completed at a 4-year institution. All told, 38.2% of the community college students completed a program either at the

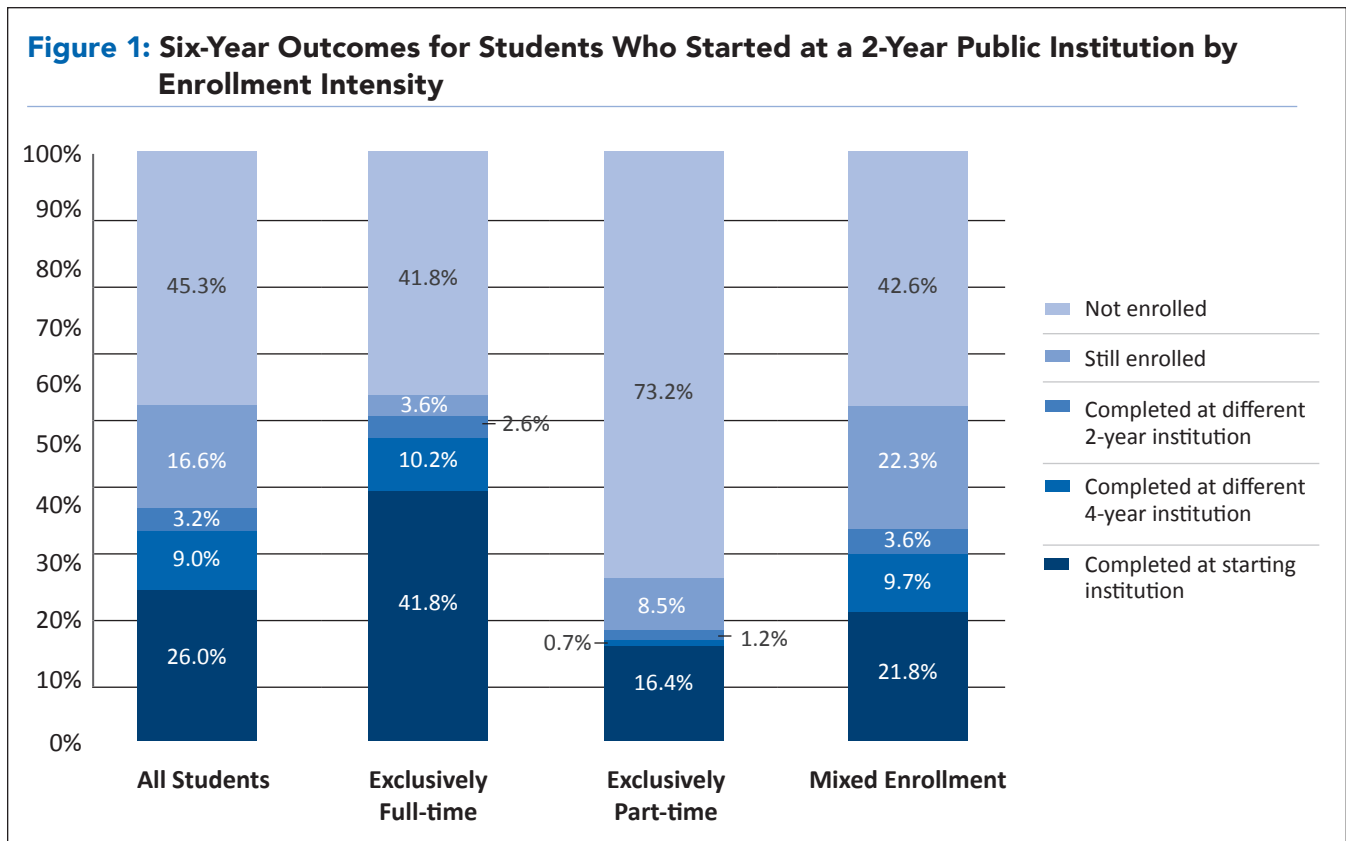
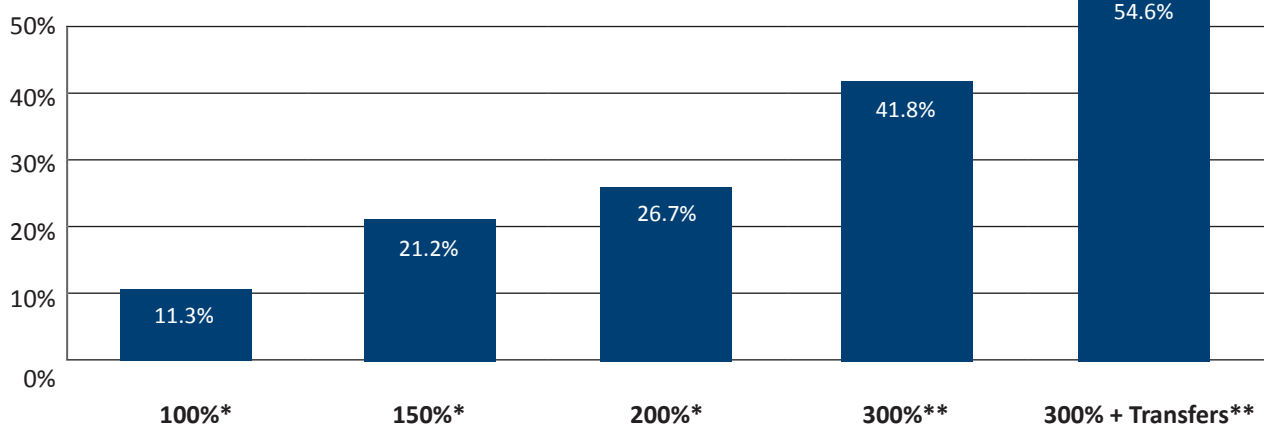


Figure 2: Completion Rates of First-Time, Full-Time Students Who Start at 2-Year Public Institutions

The completion rates depicted in Figure 2 are derived from two different sources but based on the same cohort of students: academic year 2009. The rates indicated by a single asterisk are from ED; the NSC is the source for the rates with two asterisks.

starting institution or a different institution within 6 years. This is for *all* students, including part-time students. An additional 17% of students at 2-year public institutions were still enrolled in a community college or 4-year institution after 6 years. NSC data show that students at 2-year public institutions whose enrollment was exclusively full time had a completion rate at their starting institution of 41.8%. This is almost double the official IPEDS graduation rate for full-time students. By including students who transfer to other institutions, the NSC completion rate for full-time student's increases to 55%, or more than two-and-a-half times the official ED graduation rate. These findings counter the conventional wisdom that "most community college students don't graduate," because in fact, most full-time students do.

An NSC follow-up report that takes a state-level view of student completion rates¹¹ and uses the same methodology found that nationally, about a third (32%) of students who started at a public 2-year institution completed at another institution. In 10 states—Texas, California, Kansas, South Carolina, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Nebraska, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (in order of highest to lowest)—the completion rate at an institution other than the public 2-year where the student started was above one third. In California and Texas, more than 40% of all students

who started at a public 2-year institution completed at another institution.

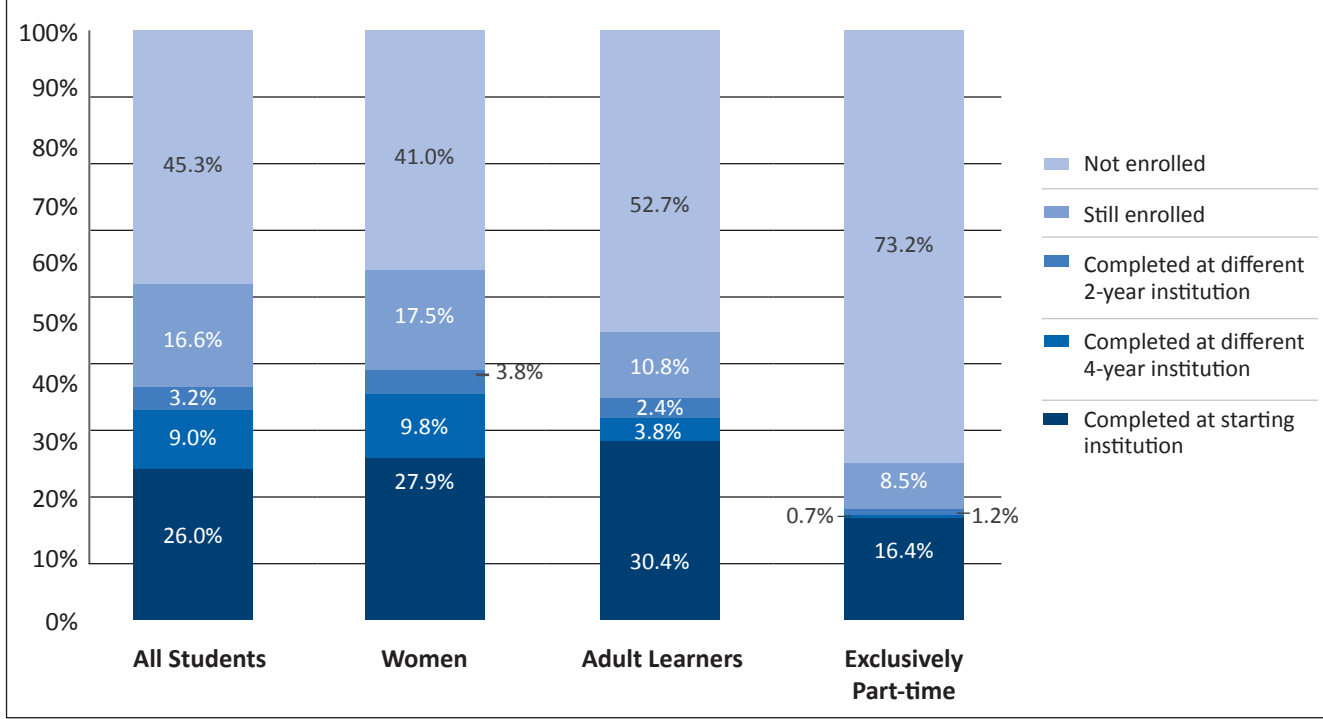
The completion rate for students who started at a public 2-year institution and graduated from a 4-year institution was 15.1% nationally, but 20% or more in five states – Iowa, North Dakota, Virginia, Kansas, and Texas.

In contrast, the NSC completion rate for exclusively part-time students at 2-year public institutions was 18.3%, with 16.4% completing at their starting institution, which is less than 5 percentage points less than the cohort of full-time students after 3 years as measured by ED.

As Figure 2 shows, the length of time that community college students are tracked, as well as taking into account transfer to other institutions, makes a considerable difference in completion rates. Using a 6-year window, which AACC advocates, completion rates are nearly five times higher than the "on-time" rate or 2-year window that only looks at the starting institution.

Nearly one out of three (31.8%) community college completers receive their credential from a different institution than the one they entered. Not surprisingly, this was the highest percent of all sectors, with the exception of 2-year private for-profit students (34.8%). The 6-year completion rate differed by student

Figure 3: Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started at a 2-year Public Institution by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity



gender and age as follows (Figure 3): (1) women had a higher completion rate than men—41.5% and 35.7%, respectively; and (2) adult learners (those over age 24) had a lower completion rate than those 20 or younger, but higher than students between ages 20 and 24, 36.6% compared to 40.7% and 25.1%, respectively.

According to the NSC, adult community college learners who attended exclusively part time had a 25.6% completion rate, compared to 49.5% who attended exclusively full time. The youngest students who attended exclusively full time had the highest completion rate of 59.7%, a full 10 percentage points higher than their over 24-year-old counterparts. Community college students in the in-between age group, between 20 and 24, who attended exclusively full time had a completion rate of only 34.8%.

The Impact of Changes in Enrollment on Completion Rates

College enrollment has declined since its peak in fall 2010, and completion rates have either held steady or declined slightly, depending on the cohort

and measure. Declining enrollments, particularly in institutions that educate a high proportion of non-traditional age students, are not unusual as the economy recovers. But stagnant completion rates are disappointing. Why have they not budged? Some speculate that the rise in enrollments during the recession included large numbers of students unprepared for college, and once the economy showed signs of improvement, these students left in pursuit of employment. This phenomenon would be particularly evident in open admissions institutions. Others caution that looking only at rates misses seeing the overall increase in the number of college credentials awarded in the post-recession years.

To meet national goals of a more educated population and workforce, increased enrollments in higher education are necessary but insufficient. There are manifold efforts underway to boost community college completion that hopefully will drive up student success rates and the number of credentials earned.

Notes

¹ Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2015). Enrollment and employees in postsecondary institutions, fall 2014; and financial statistics and academic libraries, fiscal year 2014: First look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2016-005). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>

² Digest of Education Statistics, 2013, Table 303.25: Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by control and level of institutions: 1970 through 2014. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_303.25.asp?current=yes

³ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2015, December). Term enrollment estimates: Fall 2015. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2015.pdf>

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2016, January 11). Payroll employment increases across most major industries in 2015. *The Economics Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/payroll-employment-increases-across-most-major-industries-in-2015.htm>

⁵ Desrochers, D.M., Hurlburt, S. (2016, January). Trends in college spending: 2003–2013. Washington, DC: Delta Cost Project, American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <http://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/Delta-Cost-Trends-in-College%20Spending-January-2016.pdf>

⁶ American Association of Community Colleges. (2016, January). Community college legislative priorities, January 2016. Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Advocacy/Documents/AACC_Legislative_Priorities_Jan2016Final.pdf

⁷ National Center on Education Statistics. (2015). Outcome measures survey component frequently asked questions 2015-16. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/pdf/2015_OutcomeMeasures_FAQs.pdf

⁸ Supra note 1.

⁹ Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2015). Graduation rates for selected cohorts, 2006-11; student financial aid, academic year 2013-14; and admissions in postsecondary institutions, fall 2014: First look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2015-181). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>

¹⁰ Shapiro, D., Dunder, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Hwang, Y. (2015, November). Completing college: A national view of student attainment rates – fall 2009 cohort (Signature Report No. 10). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

¹¹ Shapiro, D., Dunder, A., Wakhungu, P., Yuan, X., Nathan, A & Hwang, Y. A. (2016, February). Completing college: A state-level view of student attainment rates (Signature Report No. 10a). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.