

Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national non-profit organization committed to helping more community college students succeed, with a special focus on students of color and low-income students. Achieving the Dream proceeds from the premise that success begets success, using a student-centered model of institutional improvement to create a culture of evidence in which data and inquiry drive broad-based institutional efforts to close achievement gaps and improve student outcomes overall.



Achieving
the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

www.achievingthedream.org

Outcomes of Pell Grant Recipients

“After four to eight years, a substantially higher percentage of students at Achieving the Dream colleges—especially low-income students and students of color—will experience success.”¹ Achieving the Dream work is focused around five major goals for student success—increasing the percentage of students who: successfully complete the courses they take; advance from remedial to credit-bearing courses; enroll in and successfully complete gatekeeper courses; enroll from one semester to the next; and earn degrees and/or certificates. These goals can now be measured with data for the earliest cohorts of students attending the first round of Achieving the Dream colleges.

Achieving the Dream uses receipt of Pell grants as a proxy for low-income status²; this issue of *Data Notes* examines and compares the changes over time in the outcomes of Pell grant recipients with the outcomes of non-recipients. The general working assumption is that the lower-income students do not succeed at the same rates as their better financed peers. Although this analysis compares Pell grant recipients with non-recipients, it is important to remember that in addition to closing the education gaps among groups of students, Achieving the Dream colleges are committed to institutional transformation that will increase outcomes for all students.

The earliest Achieving the Dream colleges—the Round 1 colleges used in this analysis—were selected for participation in the initiative due to their higher than average proportions of students of color and Pell grant recipients. Beginning with the baseline 2003 student cohort—students who first entered the college prior to the college’s participation in Achieving the Dream—and continuing with subsequent student cohorts first enrolling in the college between 2004 and 2009—the years in which colleges were planning and implementing their strategies and interventions—this analysis examines: persistence; developmental, gateway, and overall course completion rates; and credential completion or transfer rates.

Student Characteristics

Because Achieving the Dream colleges’ enrollments include high percentages of at-risk students, the distributions of their students on several characteristics—characteristics often linked to decreased rates of student success—differ compared with those of students enrolled in community colleges nationally. The following characteristics did not change significantly from the 2003 through the 2008 Achieving the Dream cohorts, as compared with students in all U.S. community colleges in 2008³:

- Forty-seven percent of Achieving the Dream students received Pell grants compared with 35 percent of all community college students nationally.
- Only 47 percent of Achieving the Dream students attended part-time during their first term compared with 59 percent nationally.
- Seventy-six percent of Achieving the Dream students were under the age of 25, 16 percentage points higher than the national average of 60 percent.
- Given the goals of Achieving the Dream, participating colleges’ students were more likely to be students of color than were those attending community colleges nationally, 57 compared with 33 percent.
- Achieving the Dream colleges enrolled slightly more males than community colleges nationally, 45 compared with 42 percent.

Student cohort size increased consistently by an average of about 2,000 students per year from 2003 to 2008, with a 2008 cohort of 72,000 students. Interestingly, the 2009 cohort spiked by about 12,000 students. This large one-year increase in cohort size may be attributed to the recession and consequent labor market tightening in 2009; historically, when people cannot find jobs, community college enrollments increase. The following shifts occurred in the

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¹ <http://www.achievingthedream.org/ABOUTATD/GOALS/default.tp>

² Note: Using Pell grant receipt as a proxy for low income is not a perfect estimator for many reasons, among them: due to unusual financial circumstances, sometimes higher income students become eligible for Pell grants; students who apply for Pell grants may possess ambition that, perhaps, is different from that of non-recipient, low income students; and, there may be many students who fall just above the Pell grant eligibility line, so are relatively low-income, but do not receive Pell grants.

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2010*, NCES 2011015. Washington, DC: April 2011. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011015>.

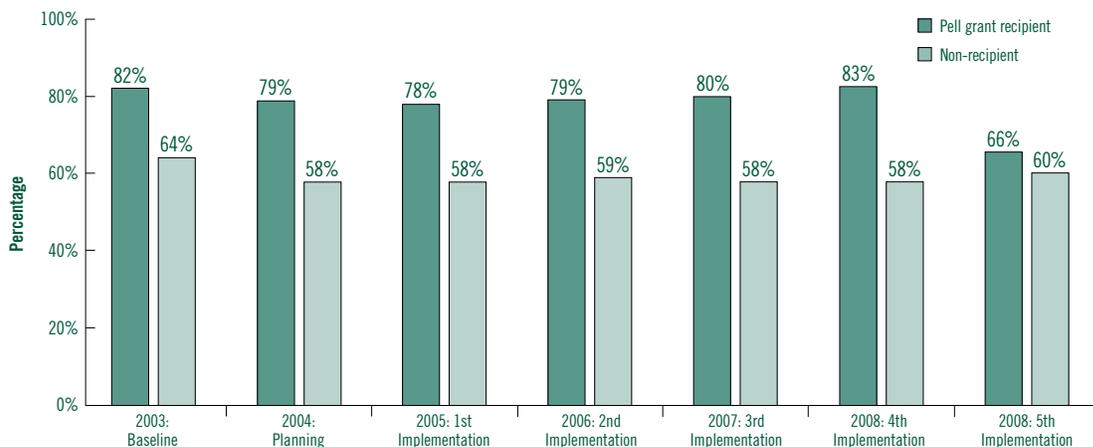
What Is a Cohort?

A cohort is a group of people studied during a period of time. The individuals in the group have at least one statistical factor—such as when they started college—in common.

The Achieving the Dream 2002 student cohort, for example, is the group of credential-seeking students that attended Achieving the Dream institutions for the first time in fall 2002.

Tracking a cohort makes it possible to compare progress and outcomes of different groups of students (e.g., groups defined by race, age or other demographic characteristics) and to determine if there are gaps in achievement among groups of interest.

Figure 1. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students persisting to the second term, by Pell grant status and cohort



Note: Includes cohorts 2003 through 2009 from Round 1 colleges.

composition of the 2009 cohort, as compared with previous cohorts:

- The percentage of students over the age of 25 increased 7 points.
- The percentage of students receiving Pell grants declined 4 points—possibly caused by larger enrollments of older students who may not be as likely to be eligible for Pell grants as younger students.
- The percentage of students attending full-time during their first term declined 4 points; this decline could be related to the increased enrollment of older students, and, thus, likely more working students.
- The percentage of students of color declined 4 points.

Second Term Persistence

Figure 1 displays second term persistence rates for Pell grant recipients and non-recipients; these rates held relatively steady within a range of six percentage points for non-recipients and five percentage points for recipients.⁴ Excluding the 2009 cohort, recipients persisted to the second term at rates that were 18 to 25 percentage points higher than non-recipients, depending on cohort. The precipitous drop in the second term persistence rate for recipients in the 2009 cohort—from 83 to 66 percent—may be due to the different mix of student characteristics and the economic problems of the 2009 cohort compared with earlier cohorts.

Coursework Progression

Community college students enroll with varying academic and developmental needs. Students often struggle to complete their developmental coursework. Gateway courses such as math

and English can be stumbling blocks for many students, especially for those testing into multiple developmental subject areas or levels of need. Past Achieving the Dream research has indicated that the majority of students completing all of their developmental coursework do so within the first or second year⁵; furthermore, students need to complete their gateway coursework to ultimately complete or transfer. Thus, Achieving the Dream's goals include increasing the percentage of students who successfully complete their developmental requirements and continue on to complete gateway coursework.

Two-year developmental English completion rates ranged between 30 and 42 percent over the cohorts, with an upward trend over time (figure 2). Pell grant recipients, for most cohorts, had higher two-year developmental English completion rates than did non-recipients. The percentage of students completing gateway English within three years also trends upward—about 11 percentage points across the five cohorts. Pell grant recipients completed gateway English coursework at a rate of about five percentage points higher than did non-recipients for each cohort.

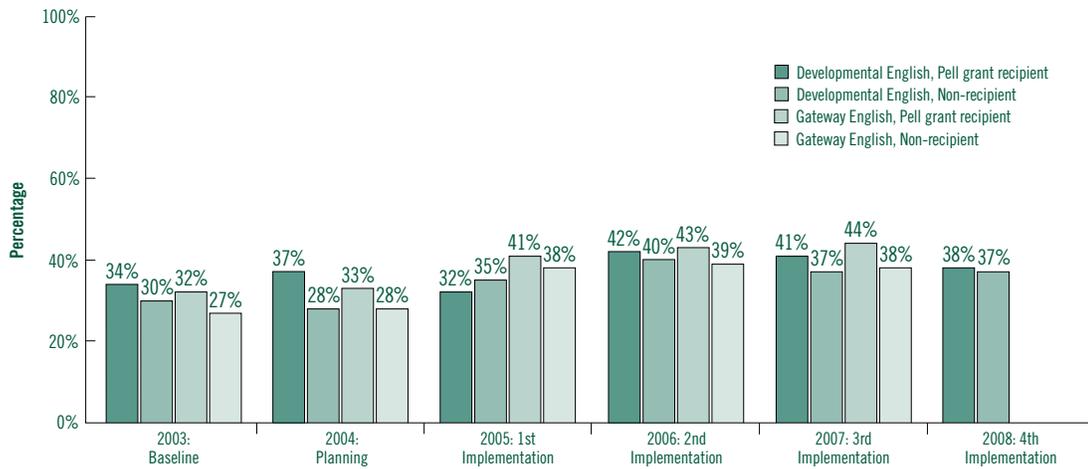
Math is a greater stumbling block than is English for many students, as fewer students completed developmental math coursework within two years as compared with English. For example, 24 percent of 2008 cohort Pell grant recipients and 19 percent of non-recipients completed developmental math within two years, and 21 percent of recipients and 20 percent of non-recipients in the 2007 cohort completed gateway math within three years (figure 3). Pell grant recipients have higher completion rates on both measures, but the difference is

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⁴ Persistors are those who attempted courses during the second term; this does not include students who completed or transferred in either the first or second terms.

⁵ Clery, S. and Topper, A. "Developmental Education: Completion Status and Outcomes," *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*. Vol. 3, No. 4. July/August 2008. Available: http://www.achievingthedream.org/pdf/datanotes/DataNotes_JulyAugust_08.pdf

Figure 2. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students completing developmental English requirements within two years, and percentage completing gateway English within three years, by Pell grant status and cohort



Note: Includes cohorts 2003 through 2008 from Round 1 colleges. Students in the 2008 and 2009 cohorts have not been enrolled long enough to report both outcome measures.

small and it shows no clear trend over time. For both measures, a slight decline is evident for both recipients and non-recipients for the 2004 cohort, and continues to the 2005 cohort. Developmental and gateway math completion rates for non-recipients rise and fall over the implementation cohorts, but an upward trend is evident for Pell Grant recipients.

Credits Attempted and Completed

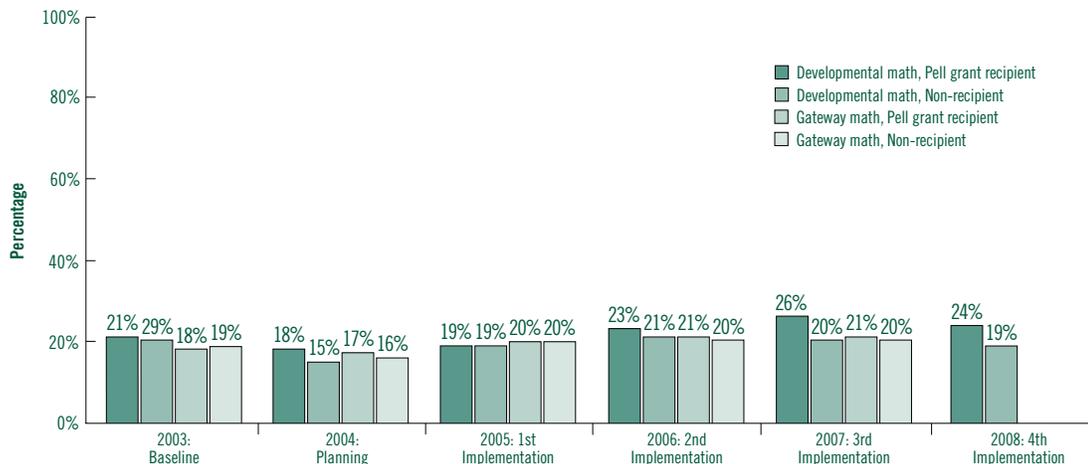
The more quickly students earn credits; the more likely they are to complete a credential; completing classes attempted is a positive predictor of later success. Pell grant recipients have an advantage over non-recipients on the number of credits attempted, but not the percent completed. Pell grant recipients attempted 4 to 6 more credits during year one than non-recipients for all cohorts studied (figure 4). This difference could be a result of the larger portion of Pell

grant recipients attending full-time than non-recipients, thus allowing recipients to attempt more credits per term.⁶ For each of the 2004 through 2008 cohorts, the number of credits attempted by Pell grant recipients held steady at 20, but dropped to 18 for the 2009 cohort. This drop in credits attempted could be a result of the decline in the percentage of 2009 cohort students attending full-time.

Despite the larger number of credits attempted by Pell grant recipients, they completed a smaller percentage of attempted credits than did non-recipients, and the difference persisted through students' first, second, and third academic years. During the first academic year, the percentage of credits completed differs for recipients and non-recipients in the different cohorts by 2 to 8 percent, yet by year three, the difference closes to less than 1 to 2 percent.

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Figure 3. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students completing developmental math requirements within two years, and percentage completing gateway math within three years, by Pell grant status and cohort



Note: Includes cohorts 2003 through 2008 from Round 1 colleges. Students in the 2008 and 2009 cohorts have not been enrolled long enough to report both outcome measures.

⁶ Sixty percent of Pell grant recipients attended full-time during their first term, compared with 40 percent of non-recipients, for the majority of the cohorts.

Figure 4. Number of credits attempted by Achieving the Dream students, and percentage of credits completed that were attempted, by Pell grant status and cohort year

Cohort year	Number of credits attempted		Percentage of credits completed that were attempted by the end of...					
			Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Pell grant recipient	Non-recipient	Pell grant recipient	Non-recipient	Pell grant recipient	Non-recipient	Pell grant recipient	Non-recipient
2003: Baseline	23	19	66	69	79	80	79	79
2004: Planning	20	14	65	69	77	81	78	80
2005: 1st Implementation	20	14	63	65	76	77	77	77
2006: 2nd Implementation	20	14	63	67	76	79	77	78
2007: 3rd Implementation	20	14	64	71	76	82	79	81
2008: 4th Implementation	20	14	65	73	78	83	*	*
2009: 5th Implementation	18	15	70	72	*	*	*	*

*Students in the 2008 and 2009 cohorts have not been enrolled long enough to report both outcome measures.
Note: Includes cohorts 2003 through 2008 from the Round 1 colleges.

Overall, students completed a higher percentage of attempted credits the longer they stayed in school, an expected result as stop-out and dropout rates are highest during the first year when students are dealing with new academic challenges. Finally, there is an upward trend in the percentage of attempted credits completed in progressive cohorts—during the first year for recipients, and for the first, second, and third years for non-recipients.

College Completion and Transfer Rates

Three-year completion and transfer rates varied over the cohort years, but Pell grant recipients equaled or exceeded the rates for non-recipients for all but the baseline cohort year (figure 5).⁷ The combined completion/transfer rate is higher for each implementation year cohort than the planning or baseline year cohort. It is not shown on the table, but the completion and transfer rates increase significantly beyond the third year; after seven years, the combined completion/transfer rate for the 2003 cohort was 30 percent, with 19 percent completing and 11 percent transferring. This is more than double the 12 to 13 percent three-year completion/transfer rate for the same cohort.

What Does it Mean?

The general assumption is that lower-income students (Pell grant recipients) do not succeed at the same rates as higher income students (non-recipients); the data explored here do not support this assumption. In many cases, Pell grant recipi-

ents have better outcomes than non-recipients. And, although the results are mixed for measures indicating that the educational achievement gaps are closing, or that the colleges are making progress in increasing educational outcomes for all students, this analysis indicates that Achieving the Dream colleges have improved outcomes in several of the Achieving the Dream goals: Larger percentages of students are completing developmental math and English requirements, and upward trends are seen in the percentage of students completing their gateway coursework and the percentage of credits attempted that are completed. In general, Pell grant recipients have the advantage in most outcome measures, with the exception of the credit completion rate, where non-recipients have the advantage, and in completion/transfer rates, which are comparable for the two groups.

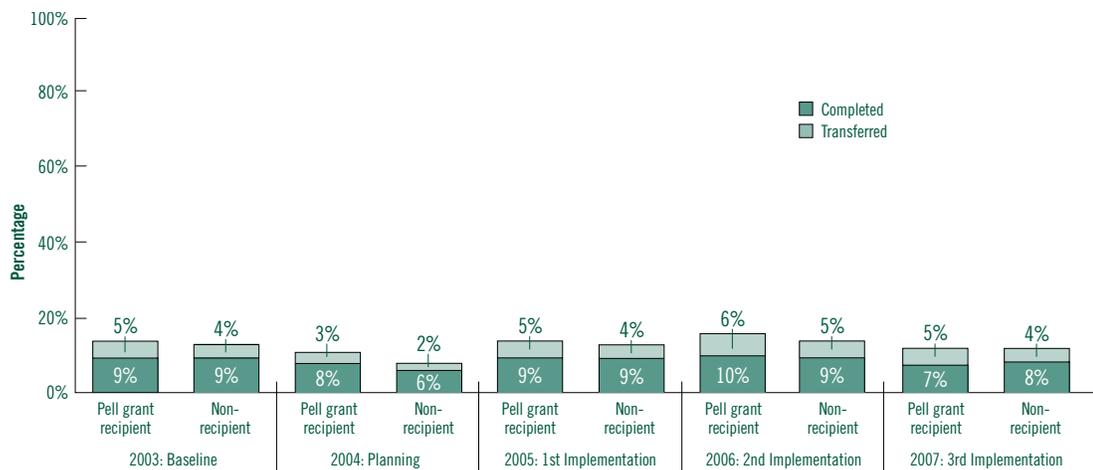
However, there are several reasons why overall larger increases in student outcomes do not necessarily prevail:

- Many of the strategies implemented target a limited group of students. When evidence shows that these strategies are effective, they can begin to be scaled up, resulting in measurable institutional improvement. Several years can pass between implementation and seeing institution-wide results.
- Strategies need to be in place for long periods of time before the beneficial effects can be

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⁷ Note: Transfer rates reported for Achieving the Dream are transfers to two- and/or four-year institutions.

Figure 5. Percentage of Achieving the Dream students completing or transferring within three years, by Pell grant status and cohort



Note: Includes cohorts 2003 and 2007 from the Round 1 colleges. Students in the 2008 and 2009 cohorts have not been enrolled long enough to report both outcome measures.

demonstrated—especially in light of the fact that it takes a significant portion of students more than the “standard” 150 percent of time to complete.

- Although the use of longitudinal data can help inform policy and practice by looking at cohorts of students seven to eight years after first enrollment, colleges often need to make short-term decisions based on the

limited data available at that time. Informed decision-making relies both on identifying the empirical links between early indicators of success and tracking longer-term outcomes.

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of *Data Notes*, featuring your college’s data, at www.dreamweb.submission.org. ■

Data Notes is a bimonthly publication that examines data to illuminate the challenges facing Achieving the Dream colleges and to chart their progress over time.

This issue of *Data Notes* was written by Sue Clery, Senior Research Associate, with assistance from Tomás Harmon, Intern, JBL Associates, Inc., Consultant to Achieving the Dream, and edited by Katie Loovis, Achieving the Dream’s Director of Strategic Communications & Marketing. Newsletter production by Linda Marcetti, founder of Asterisk & Image, subcontractor to JBL Associates, Inc.

If you have questions regarding this issue, or if there is a topic you would like to see addressed in *Data Notes*, please contact Sue Clery at sclery@jblassoc.com.

Note: This issue of *Data Notes* uses the January 2011 version of the Achieving the Dream National Database. Institutions are grouped by the year they started work with the Achieving the Dream.