What is in a Name? Are they Really Credential-Seeking Students?

Colleges often focus on improving programs instead of reaching institutional goals. One reason for this is that they measure success in terms of programmatic outcomes, but do not analyze successful students who leave without obtaining degrees or certificates. Many students enter community colleges with intentions other than obtaining degrees or transferring to four-year institutions. Seemingly, some credential-seeking students often are simply interested in enrolling in a class or two to brush up on or learn a new skill, or to fulfill requirements for occupational certification. Other students may be simply “testing the academic waters,” which is easily done at a local community college. Still others may be enrolled at four-year institutions and taking community college courses concurrently. Research indicates graduation rates among community college students who are likely more committed to their academics—those attending more than half-time, or who stated that earning a credential or transferring was their intention—are much higher than for all students entering who are classified as being credential-seeking.1

This analysis explores students’ first-term academic achievement, and those who returned for a second academic term. The intention was to tease out students who left college after the first term, even though they were successful in the courses they attempted. Students from all Achieving the Dream cohorts and colleges were included in this analysis. Demographic and academic differences—race/ethnicity, Pell receipt, gender, age, major field of student, attendance and developmental referral status—were examined, along with persistence to the second term for the following student groups:

- Students completing all courses attempted, and earning grade point averages (GPAs) of 2.0 or higher.
- Students with GPAs under 2.0, but completing all courses attempted.
- Students not completing all courses attempted, but earning GPAs of 2.0 or higher.
- Students not completing all courses attempted, and earning GPAs under 2.0.

First Term Outcomes

Figure 1 displays students’ first-term outcomes in terms of GPA achieved and whether students completed all courses they attempted. Overall, nearly one-half of students, 47 percent, completed all of their attempted courses and earned GPAs of 2.0 or higher during their first academic term—called first-term achievers herein—while nearly one-quarter of students, 23 percent, did not complete all courses attempted and completed the first term with GPAs under 2.0. The remaining 30 percent of students were evenly divided between completing all courses attempted with less than a 2.0 GPA, and attaining a GPA of 2.0 or higher, but not completing all attempted courses.

Interestingly, the first-term achiever rate varied significantly by age. Student’s age is positively correlated with first-term achievement: 43 percent of students under the age of 23 were first-term achievers, compared with 53 percent of those 23 to 29 years old, and 58 percent of those 30 or older.

Achieving the Dream uses Pell grant receipt as an indicator of low-income status; Pell grant receipt likely also indicates lower socioeconomic status (SES)2. SES has been shown to be correlated with academic achievement. It is not surprising that Pell grant recipients were less likely to be first-term achievers than non-recipients: 49 percent of students who did not receive Pell grants were first-term achievers, compared with 41 percent of students receiving Pell grants.

Because developmental education students begin with academic challenges, they likely initially struggle with their academics more than students without developmental needs. Thus, it is not (continued on next page)

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2 SES is a measure of economic and social position relative to others based on a combination of income, education, and occupation.
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.

Students attending less than half-time... were much more likely to be first-term achievers.

By race/ethnicity and gender, women were more likely to be first-term achievers than men, and Native American, Hispanic and Black students were less likely to be first-term achievers than White and Asian/Pacific Islander students. Interestingly, transfer-seeking students were slightly less likely to be first-term achievers, 45 percent, than were terminal-seeking majors or students with undeclared majors, 49 percent for both groups.

Second Term Persistence

Overall, 68 percent of students persisted to the second term (figure 2). Students with higher grades—GPAs of 2.0 or higher—were more likely to persist than those with grades below 2.0, whether they completed all courses attempted during the first term or not. Interestingly, among students who had GPAs of 2.0 or higher, those who did not complete all courses attempted persisted to the second term at the highest rate, 80 percent, while those who did complete all first-term courses, persisted at a slightly lower rate, 78 percent.

Figure 3 displays first-term achievers by second-term persistence status and selected student characteristics. Previously noted was the positive

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correlation between first-term achievement and age. Interestingly, the results indicate that age is negatively correlated with persistence of first-term achievers: 69 percent of first-term achievers over 30, and 71 percent of those between 23 and 29, persisted to the second term, compared with 84 percent of those younger than 23. This negative relationship could be the result of non-academic demands on older students causing them not to enroll for the second term. Or, older students may be more likely to have jobs than younger students, and simply needed one or two classes to gain expertise for their current job, thus decreasing the need to re-enroll. This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that first-term achievers who enrolled less-than-half-time during the first term persisted at much lower rates than students who attended half-time or more, 55 compared to 80 to 90 percent for half- and full-time students.

Noteworthy is the difference in second-term persistence between first-term achievers who were Pell grant recipients or non-recipients—87 percent of Pell grant recipients persisted to the second term, compared with 74 percent of non-recipients. The higher persistence rates for non-recipients could be the result of several combined influences, among them the fact that Pell grant recipients are more likely to attend full-time, and thus to persist, than are non-recipients. There may be a large portion of non-recipients who are on the border financially and had financial reasons for not persisting.

First-term achievers who were referred to at least one developmental course were more likely to persist to the second term, 83 percent, than were those not referred to any developmental education, 74 percent. Perhaps successful completion of the first-term, and developmental education coursework, created the momentum for developmental students that enable them to carry on to (continued on next page)
the second term. Further investigation may reveal an inverse relationship between age and developmental needs, with older students needing less developmental coursework than younger, thus causing higher persistence rates for developmental students. Only minor variations were revealed when examining second-term persistence rates by gender and race/ethnicity, and when comparing terminal degree-seeking and transfer-seeking students.

**What Does it Mean?**

The analysis indicates that age and first-term attendance status are significantly related to both first-term achievement and second-term persistence. Older students and those attending less than half-time were more likely to be first-term achievers, but they were also less likely to persist to the second term. This phenomenon could indicate that older students who are employed already may merely need a course or two for occupational certification, or to brush up on or quickly learn a new skill. Thus, although they enrolled in a credential-bearing course or two, they may truly not be credential-seeking students. Or, these older students could have other demands on their time, such as family, prohibiting them from attending full-time and persisting to the second term. Finally, older, first-term achievers who attended less-than-full-time would have been ineligible for Pell grants and thus, may have encountered financial issues that prevented them from re-enrolling—the findings indicated Pell grant recipients were more likely to persist than non-recipients. Or, simply, the older students may never have intended to continue their enrollment.

The academic challenges faced by developmental students are evidenced by the first-term achievement—developmental students were less likely to be first-term achievers than were non-developmental students. However, if they did achieve, developmental students were more likely to persist to the second term than their non-developmental counterparts.

These results emphasize the need to disaggregate student data to refine what seems like an obvious relationship between achievement, measured here by grades, first-term completion, and second-term persistence. The relationships revealed here indicate interventions aimed at improving student outcomes need to be sensitive to many variations. Further, colleges need to determine methods to differentiate first-time students who do not intend to continue from those who identify credential-seeking goals upon entry. To respond to these questions, colleges can examine the following:

- What are the differences in the academic achievement of students who do not return for a second term?
- Why do students who are academically successful early in their college careers leave?
- If all students were successful in their studies, what would be our persistence rate?
- What can be done for students who do not do well in their first semester, but continue their enrollment?
- Are there issues that older students face in college that accounts for their early leaving? What can the college do to address these issues?

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