

Inexpensive test can lead to higher college graduation rates

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Students who pass one or more College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests in high school or college are more likely to earn a postsecondary degree, according to research published as a Georgia State University W.J. Usery Workplace Research Group [working paper](#).

The CLEP is a program of college-level exams that offers credits for student mastery of specific content areas—at \$85 per exam—in lieu of completing a course. It is accepted by 2,900 colleges and universities across the U.S.

Passing CLEP exams led to a 17 percent increase in associate degree completion for students at two-year colleges and a 2.6 percent increase in bachelor's degree completion for students at four-year colleges, the research found. CLEP credits also lessen the time it takes to obtain a degree by reducing the number of courses required for its completion.

Economist Jonathan Smith, an assistant professor at Georgia State's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, and his colleagues Angela Boatman of Vanderbilt University, Michael Hurwitz of the College Board and Jason Lee of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission analyzed College Board data sets from more than 800,000 unique, first-time CLEP test takers between 2008 and 2015.

"Degree completion remains a persistent problem in American postsecondary education," said Smith. "Nationally, only 60 percent of first-time, full-time, four-year college students who began working on their degree in the fall of 2008 completed it six years later. And only 20 percent of those who entered public community colleges in 2008 received an associate's degree within three years. Over 20 years, these percentages amount to approximately 31 million students enrolling in college and leaving without holding a degree or certificate."

Degree completion rates are even lower for students who are underrepresented minorities, part-time, adult and military veterans.

Smith and his team found that two-year college enrollees who earned a credit-granting CLEP score and were military veterans whose exams were funded by a federal government program were 18.1 percent more

likely to obtain an associate degree. Adults older than age 24 were 19.5 percent more likely, and those who had been home-schooled were 62.8 percent more likely to obtain a degree.

"Our findings have important policy implications because they suggest that the CLEP, and other credit-granting exams like it, can be a cost-effective way to increase degree attainment rates in the U.S., particularly among underrepresented students," Smith said.

"The impacts from this inexpensive intervention are at least as large in magnitude as most other programs designed to improve [degree completion](#)," he and his co-authors conclude.

Provided by Georgia State University

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