

Community college transfers as likely to earn a BA as four-year students, despite credit transfer roadblocks

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Students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college and successfully transfer to a four-year college have BA graduation rates equal to similar students who begin at four-year colleges, according to new research published today. That rate would actually increase – to 54 percent from 46 percent – if not for the loss of academic credits when students transfer, said study authors.

"The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree," by Paul Attewell and David Monaghan, both of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, was published online today in [Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis](#) (EEPA), a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Attewell and Monaghan found that students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college are indeed less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than otherwise similar undergraduates who begin at a four-year school. However, contrary to an earlier generation of research, there are no significant differences in BA completion rates between those students who started at a community college and successfully transferred and their peers who began at four-year schools.

Attewell and Monaghan identified restrictive credit transfer policies—and not a lack of academic preparation, an emphasis on vocational training, or a lack of financial aid—as the reason for the gap

in BA attainment between otherwise similar undergraduates who enter community colleges and their four-year counterparts.

"Loss of credits is a tax on transfer students," Monaghan said.

"Policymakers should be pushing both community colleges and four-year institutions to address it."

"Community colleges should be encouraged to invest more in transfer counseling services for their students, and more four-year institutions need to develop processes for facilitating, not hindering, credit transfer for academically qualified students," said Monaghan.

Attewell and Monaghan found that:

- Only 58 percent of transfers are able to bring all or almost all (90 percent or more) of their credits with them.
- About 14 percent of transfers lose more than 90 percent of their credits.
- The remaining 28 percent lose between 10 percent and 89 percent of their credits.

Even after controlling for college GPA and credits earned, students who can transfer most of their credits are more likely to complete a BA than those who cannot.

- Students who have all or almost all their credits transferred are 2.5 times more likely to earn a BA than students with less than half their credits transferred.
- Students who get between half and 89 percent of their credits accepted have a 74 percent higher chance of earning a BA.

The implication is that students who are able to transfer all or most of their community college credits are more likely to graduate than peers

who started their postsecondary education at a four-year school.

Some states, such as New Jersey, mandate that all for-credit courses earned in state community colleges must count toward BA graduation after transfer to a state four-year college. Modeling a "what if" scenario for this policy in all states, Attewell and Monaghan project that BA attainment among community college transfer students would rise to 54 percent from 46 percent.

"This percentage is potentially underestimated," said Attewell. "The obstacle of losing credits is bigger than we could measure."

Community colleges enroll about 40 percent of American undergraduates. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported in 2012 that 45 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to students who have transferred from a community college.

"The community college pipeline to a four-year degree has become huge," said Monaghan. "However, because of choke points in the [transfer](#) process, it is not meeting its full potential."

Methodology and Funding Notes

The researchers drew upon data from the "BPS Longitudinal Study," undertaken by the National Center for Education Statistics, which tracked a nationally representative cohort of American first-time freshmen for six years. The students were interviewed towards the end of their first year in college, three years later, and three years following.

Because the student body of community colleges differs from that of four-year colleges, researchers limited their comparison to financially-dependent [students](#) enrolled full-time in their first semester of either a bachelor's or associate degree program at either [community colleges](#) or

nonselective or minimally selective four-year institutions and who aspired to a bachelor's degree or higher. Subjects were matched using propensity scores that accounted for a variety of characteristics, including age, race, gender, primary language, parental education, and high school math.

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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