

Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2015

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This is the second of a series of reports on trends in national community college enrollments. National community college enrollments continue to decrease, with variations at the state and local levels. The report also examines completion rates published by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) based on institutional level reporting, and those calculated by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) based on student level data. The NSC completion rates show much higher community college success rates than those derived from ED data. The NSC data continue to make a strong case for an overhaul of federal completion measurements.

Introduction/Overview

Each year, national enrollment completion information is released for all of higher education, with sector breakouts. For the most recent year, community college enrollments continued to decline along with all postsecondary institutions, albeit somewhat less than last year. Completion rates have changed very little, although they too have decreased slightly. The following analysis uses findings from the two major sources of this information, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). It is important to understand the enrollment and completion data provided by ED and NSC in the context of the differences in the definitions and methodologies used.

Major findings include:

- Both reports indicated a continued nationwide decline in community college enrollment, although they differed with respect to its extent.
- Over the past 3 years, the decrease in enrollment of older community college students has been the highest and the most consistent.
- Tracking students beyond their starting institution, the NSC's completion rate for community colleges was 39%, compared to ED's official 21% graduation rate.
- The NSC completion rate for full-time only students, which is the most comparable to ED's official graduation rate, increases to 57%, nearly three times higher than ED's. The NSC also tracks students for twice as long as ED—6 years rather than 3 years by ED, which is 150% of the "normal time" prescribed in statute.

Trends in Community College Enrollment

The decline in overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions continued this fall, albeit somewhat abated from the previous year. In October 2014, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), part of ED, issued its report on fall enrollment, *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2013; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2013; and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2013* (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015012.pdf>). The NSC Research Center released Term Enrollment Estimates Fall 2014 on December 10, 2014, and a revised version¹ later that month (<http://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2014.pdf>).

According to the NCES report, which is based on data obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2-year public institutions experienced the second largest decrease in enrollment for the previous 2 years. For-profit institutions saw an even larger drop. For the first 2 years analyzed here, IPEDS showed a slowing in the decrease, while NSC indicates a steady, albeit small, widening in the drop in enrollment leading up to the most recent academic year. The two reports note small differences in the amount of decreased enrollment at 2-year public institutions. (Table 1)

Table 1: Changes in Fall Enrollment at Public 4-Year and 2-Year Institutions

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%	-0.2%	-3.9%	-3.6%
Fall 2013	-1.4%	-1.5%	0.3%	0.4%	-2.4%	-3.3%
Fall 2014		-1.3%		0.0%		-3.5%

Table 2: Changes in Fall Enrollment at Public 2-Year Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity

	Percent Change from Prior Year 2-Year Public Institutions					
	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	-3.7%	-3.3%	-1.5%	-6.7%	-2.7%	-4.8%

The pace of continued decrease in enrollment at community colleges is in contrast to all other sectors, including 4-year for-profit institutions that previously have seen large drops. Most recently, however, according to NSC, they experienced a 0.4% decrease in enrollment, compared to 3.5% at community colleges. The 4-year, private not-for-profits had a 1.6% gain in enrollment. Four-year public institutions have had both enrollment increases and decreases, both very small. The approximately 1,000 student increase in fall 2014, according to NSC, did not register a change in the percent of enrollment.

NSC not only reports more current enrollment counts than IPEDS, but it also has spring counts, making it a more useful source for trend information. During the last 24-month period between fall 2012 and fall 2014, the drop in enrollment at community colleges has held steady at around 3%. Explanations for these findings may well rest with student demographics and other factors associated with the status of the economy.

The NSC report provides information about the changes in enrollment for several groups of students, including those who attend full time or part time, men and women, and those 24 years of age and under and those over 24. As Table 2 shows, enrollment of older students has consistently declined, and at the highest rate, compared to other students. Noteworthy are the flips in the changes in enrollment of men versus women and part-time versus full-time students in the past year. In previous years, men had a smaller drop in enrollment than women, but the opposite was true in the most recent 12 months. Similarly, students attending full time experienced a larger decline in enrollment than their part-time counterparts.

These findings could be a result of the upturn in the economy allowing older students, many of whom were probably employed previously, to return to the workforce. (It is important to keep in mind that, during a 3-year period at the height of the recession, enrollments at 2-year public institutions increased by almost 22%.) The improvement in the economy has not been even across all industries and

occupations and these factors may be having an impact on the fluctuations in enrollment of various groups of students. Male-dominated industries, such as construction and manufacturing, experienced a more sluggish upturn than health care and business, which are more female-dominated. During the first few years of the economic recovery job growth, particularly of full-time jobs, was relatively anemic, but there has been a steady rise of a wide array of jobs more recently, which could explain why part-time students, who were more tenuously tied to education, were drawn away from pursuing postsecondary credentials and into the workforce.

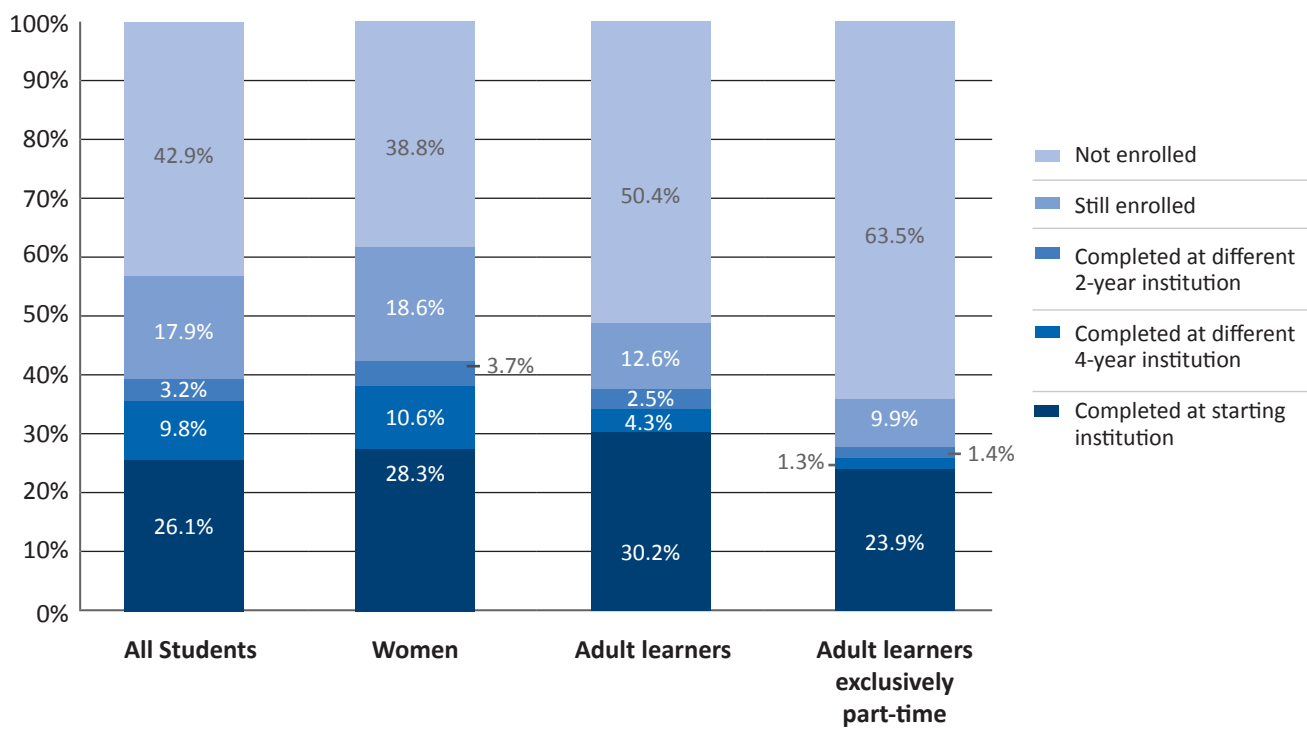
Looking ahead, the landscape of higher education could change in numerous ways. More students may be drawn away from traditional 4-year colleges and to other less expensive and more flexible institutions, such as community colleges, although evidence of that trend is thus far lacking. Other developments will likely affect overall enrollment, such as lowered tuition due to innovative cost structures and expansion and improvement in online course delivery.² The next report on enrollment will be telling as to whether these predictions are actualized.

Student Completion vs. Graduation Rates—Why the Discrepancy?

The Department of Education’s official graduation rate is widely acknowledged to be a poor measure of student completion, especially for community colleges. The primary reason is that it measures completion for only a subset of students, and, in the case of community colleges, a very small percentage of students. The graduation rate applies only to students who enroll in the fall, are first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates, attend full time and complete within 150% of normal program completion time at the institution in which they first enrolled. The majority of community college students attend part time. Many are not first-time students, nor do they first enroll in the fall. Some community college students are not degree- or certificate-seeking and many others intend to transfer to another institution to pursue their degree. AACC commends ED for introducing in the future additional graduation rate measures for part-time and transfer students, which will address some of the aforementioned shortcomings. AACC also continues to advocate for changes to the Higher Education Act when Congress reauthorizes it.

Figure 1: Six-year outcomes for students who started at a 2-year public institution by enrollment intensity



Figure 2: Six-year outcomes for students who started at 2-year public institution by select student groups

For the most recent cohort of degree/certificate-seekers attending a 2-year public institution (cohort year 2010), the official graduation rate was 21.1% (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014105.pdf>), virtually unchanged from the previous year when it was 21.2%. The rate is slightly higher for women (21.7%) than men (20.4%).

ED also tracks on-time and 200% of normal program completion time in addition to the 150% of normal program completion time, although all the other conditions such as full-time, first-time attendance apply. Compared to the 21.1% graduation rate within 150% of normal time at public 2-year institutions, 26.5% completed a degree or certificate within 200% of normal completion time (this calculation required using an earlier cohort of 2009). The on-time or 100% of normal completion graduation rate for 2-year public colleges was 11.7%. The NSC Signature Report 8, *Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates – Fall 2008 Cohort* (<http://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport8.pdf>), uses a different measure of

college completion, which tracks students for a longer period of time and across institutions. According to the NSC report (Figure 1), the overall 6-year completion rate for students in the fall of 2008³ who completed their program at the starting 2-year public institution was 26.1%.⁴ An additional 3.2% completed at a different 2-year institution and 9.8% completed at a 4-year institution. All told, 39.1% of the students who started at a community college completed a program either at the starting institution or a different institution within 6 years. This completion measure is almost double ED's official graduation rate of 21.1% and about half as high as the 4-year (200% of normal time) rate of 26.5% published by ED. According to NSC, an additional 18% of students at 2-year public institutions were still enrolled in a community college or 4-year institution after 6 years.

Students at 2-year public institutions whose enrollment was exclusively full-time had the highest completion rate at their starting institution—42.9%. This is more than double the official IPEDS graduation rate that also only includes full-time students. The

difference in the two rates is that IPEDS uses a 3-year time to graduation measure, whereas NSC uses a 6-year timeframe. Moreover, by including students who transfer to other institutions to complete their programs, the NSC completion rate for full-time students increases to 57%, or nearly *three times* the official NCEES graduation rate. The conventional wisdom is that “most community college students don’t graduate;” but the reality is that most full-time students do.

In contrast, the completion rate for exclusively part-time students in 2-year public institutions was 18.7%, with 16.5% completing at their starting institution. The completion rate for mixed enrollment students fell in between, at 35.9%, with 21.8% completing at their first institution.

One third (33.2%) of students who started at a community college and completed a program, completed the program at a different institution, the highest percent of all sectors. The 6-year completion rate differed by student gender and age as follows (Figure 2): (1) women had a higher completion rate than men—42.6% and 36.5%, respectively—and

(2) adult learners (those over age 24) had a lower completion rate than those 20 or younger, but higher than those between 20 and 24, 37% compared to 41.3% and 27.8%, respectively.

Adult learners who attended exclusively part-time had a 26.6% completion rate, compared to 49.1% who attended exclusively full time. The youngest students, those who were 20 or younger, had either the lowest or highest completion rates, depending on the attendance intensity. The 20 or younger students who attended exclusively part time had the lowest completion rate of 12.1%, but those who attended exclusively full time had the highest completion rate of 61.5%. The completion rate of the latter rivals that of 4-year institutions.

The NSC report also featured a supplemental section that examined 8-year outcomes for the fall 2006 cohort of students. By expanding the tracking window to 8 years, the overall completion rate rose to 80.8% from the 6-year 69.8% completion rate. For community colleges, however, the completion rate at 8 versus 6 years did not increase by very much, 42.7% compared to 39.1%, respectively.

Notes

¹The December 10, 2014, report stated that the enrollment information for public degree-granting institutions reflected reclassification in IPEDS of 2-year institutions as 4-year institutions. The revised report acknowledged that the reclassification was not applied consistently to previous years in the previous report. In a Technical Update, NSC reports that 16 2-year institutions were reclassified as 4-year institutions over the course of 4 years requiring that trend information to be revised accordingly.

²Stuart M. Butler, “Reimagining College,” *Opinion*, The Brookings Institutions, December 22, 2014. http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/12/22-reimagine-college-butler#.VKGwT_azP0c.mailto

³It is important to note that the NSC data are not cohort data, as in the case of IPEDS.

⁴In comparison, the official or 3-year graduation rate for the 2008 cohort, which only measure first-time, full-time students who started in the fall 2008 and completed their program in 2011 was 21.9%. *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2011; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2010; and Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 20032-08*, U.S. Department of Education, December 2012. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012174rev.pdf>