

Community College TRANSFERS and College Graduation

Whose Choices Matter Most?

BY WILLIAM R. DOYLE

We choose only what we believe might be attained through our own agency.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Currently, 40 percent of all first-time freshmen begin their postsecondary careers in community colleges, the great majority of them intending eventually to complete a bachelor's degree. But along the way something happens, and for most of them that ambition is thwarted. The question is, to what extent does this pattern reflect students' choices, and to what extent is it due to factors beyond their control?

William R. Doyle is assistant professor of higher education at Vanderbilt University. He was a senior policy analyst at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and served as project manager for the first release of Measuring Up, the state-by-state report card on higher education.

In this column, I will show how differing definitions of "students who would like to attain a bachelor's degree" generate different graduation rates, but none of them are impressive. Then I will show how external factors—particularly the acceptance of course credits—make a large difference in terms of bachelor's degree attainment among students who begin at community colleges.

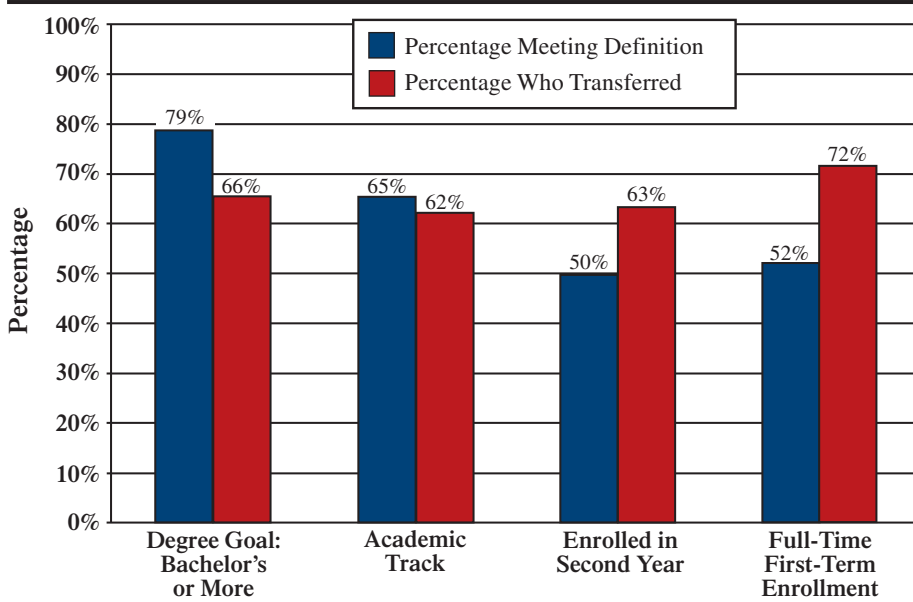
All of the data used in this column come from the U.S. Department of Education's online *Data Analysis System*, which allows the user to access many of the large-scale surveys that the National Center for Education Statistics has conducted over the last decade. Instructions for replicating the analyses in this column are available from the author (go to www.carnegiefoundation.org/change for more information). The statistics used in this column come from the 2001 *Beginning Postsecondary Students* survey, which began tracking college students in the 1995–1996 academic year. Students were followed through 2001, six years

after their initial enrollment in higher education.

To successfully complete a bachelor's degree, students must complete three steps. First, they must navigate the community college and complete a sufficient number of courses to transfer. Second, they must make the transition to a four-year institution. And last, through a combination of community college course credits and ones completed at the four-year institution, they must satisfy the requirements for a bachelor's degree.

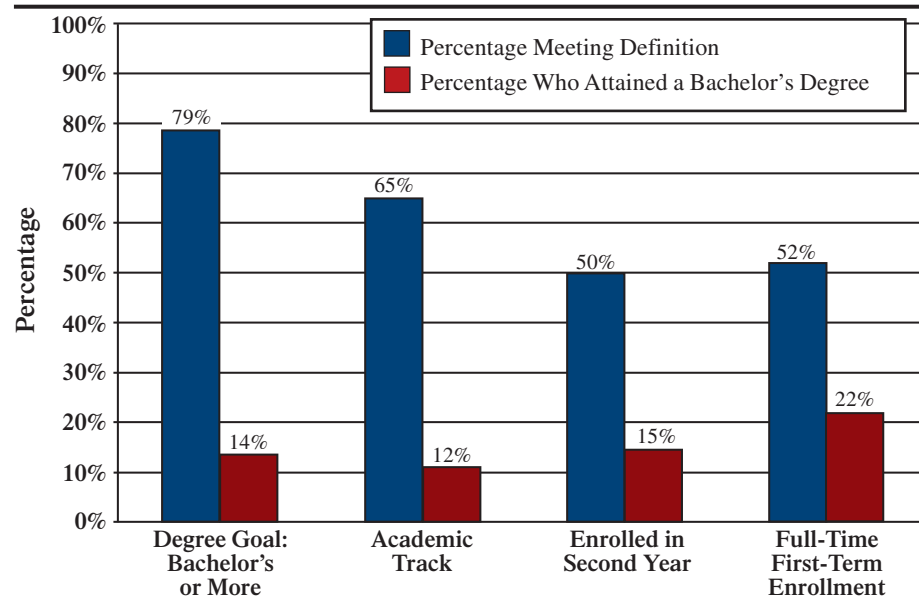
Analyzing the first step of the process has been the subject of a number of studies. Transfer rates are clearly understandable as the ratio between the number of students who leave a two-year for a four-year institution divided by the total number of students who wanted to obtain the baccalaureate. As Scot Spicer pointed out in his 1994 study, the main question in understanding transfer rates is, what's the denominator? Chart 1 shows the transfer rates among different

CHART 1. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO WERE “TRANSFER ELIGIBLE” AND PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO TRANSFERRED



Source: United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006), *Data Analysis System for Beginning Postsecondary Students*. Retrieved 1/25/2006 from <http://nces.ed.gov/das/>

CHART 2. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN SIX YEARS BY DIFFERING DEFINITIONS OF TRANSFER ELIGIBILITY



Source: United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006), *Data Analysis System for Beginning Postsecondary Students*. Retrieved 1/25/2006 from <http://nces.ed.gov/das/>

groups of “students who wanted to obtain the baccalaureate.”

Among the 79 percent of community college students who declared that their goal was a bachelor’s degree, 66 percent had transferred to a four-year college within six years of initial enrollment. If you decide that students who want a baccalaureate indicate the seriousness of that desire by enrolling in the academic track at community colleges (65 percent of entering students), 62 percent of students aiming at a four-year degree had transferred by 2001.

Under the definition of “those who stayed on into their second year at the community college,” 63 percent had transferred. And finally, among the 50 percent of students at community colleges who enrolled full time in their first term, nearly 72 percent had transferred to a four-year institution. In other words, some actions trump intentions: students who are in a position to choose full-time enrollment were the most successful in eventually transferring to a four-year institution. This finding partly replicates a 2001 study done by Ellen Bradburn and David Hurst for the National Center for Education Statistics.

What happens to these different types of students once they transfer? Chart 2 shows the six-year bachelor’s degree completion rates for each group.

As Chart 2 shows, overall six-year completion rates for those who begin at a community college are very low, much lower than the unimpressive 58 percent six-year completion rate for those who begin their postsecondary careers at four-year colleges. Clearly, those who begin on the full-time track do a little better than their peers, but only one-fifth of these students who started at a community college full time in the hopes of completing a bachelor’s degree had done so within six years.

Why is this picture so bleak? It seems that students' eventual baccalaureate degree completion may have more to do with issues outside of their control than their own choices. Few analyses have looked at the acceptance of credit hours in the target institution, which turns out to be key to students' success—or lack of it.

Chart 3 illustrates the percentage of students who had all of their course credits accepted at their four-year institutions. No matter which type of student we observe, only about half were able to transfer all of their credits.

But those who had all of their credits accepted had much different outcomes than those who had some or none of their credits accepted. Chart 4 shows the overall outcome for these two types of transfer students.

Among those who had all of their credits accepted, 82 percent had graduated within six years with a bachelor's degree—a graduation rate that compares favorably with that of students who begin at private four-year institutions. Among those who had only some of their credits accepted, 42 percent had attained a bachelor's degree, while 36 percent were still enrolled and 19 percent had left higher education.

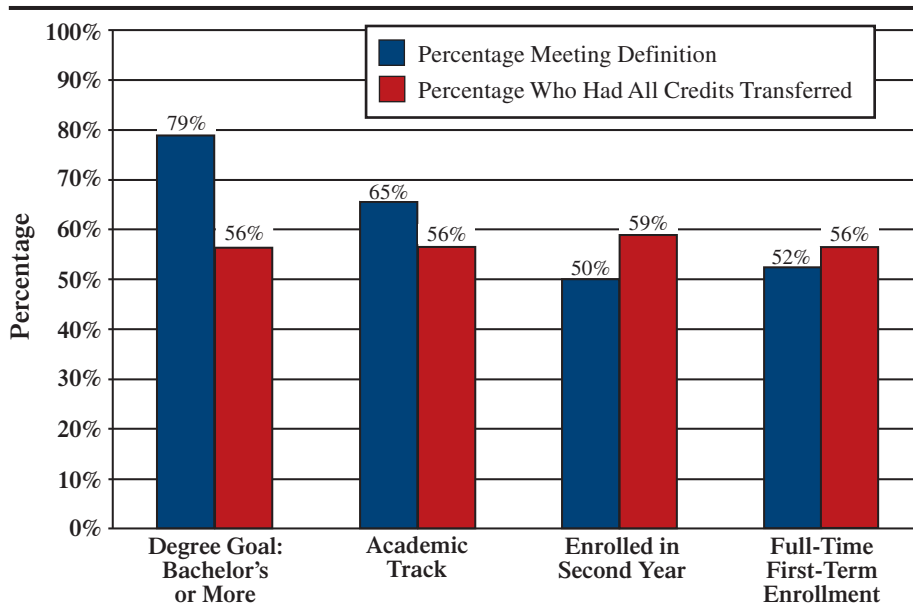
Much of this is due to simple arithmetic. If fewer course credits are accepted, those courses must be repeated, which will take longer. While some of those students who are still enrolled will successfully complete their bachelor's degrees, the longer one is enrolled, the worse the odds of graduating. Family and work obligations begin to take precedence over a college career that has already lasted six years.

What is striking about this analysis is that the transfer of course credits is largely an inter- or intra-institutional responsibility. Students bear much of the responsibility for getting to the point of transfer, and they should be encouraged to enroll full time if at all possible. But much of what happens after transferring seems to occur as a result of factors beyond their control and is the responsibility of state-

level and institutional policymakers. The articulation agreements, common course numbering, and curriculum decisions that the policymakers develop all play

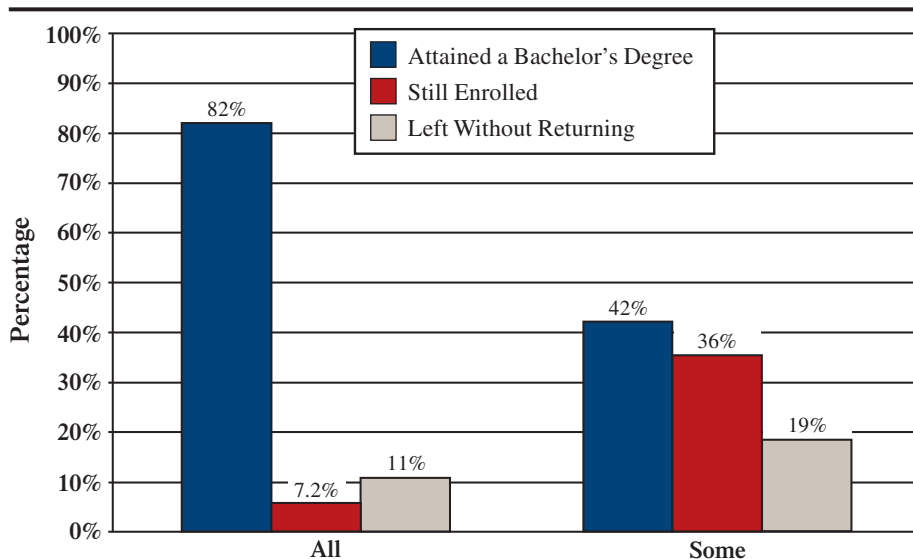
a pivotal role in determining how many transfer credits will be accepted and hence the likelihood of students' attaining their educational goals. ☐

CHART 3. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO HAD ALL COURSE CREDITS ACCEPTED AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS



Source: United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006), *Data Analysis System for Beginning Postsecondary Students*. Retrieved 1/25/2006 from <http://nces.ed.gov/das/>

CHART 4. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN SIX YEARS BY CREDITS ACCEPTED AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS



Source: United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006), *Data Analysis System for Beginning Postsecondary Students*. Retrieved 1/25/2006 from <http://nces.ed.gov/das/>