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ARTICLE TOOLS

February 28, 2012

A Third of Students Transfer Before Graduating, and Many Head Toward Community Colleges

By Jennifer Gonzalez

One-third of all students switch institutions at least once before earning a degree, says a report released on Tuesday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The "traditional" path of entering and graduating from the same institution is decreasingly followed, the report says. Students transfer across state lines and institution types, and even "reverse transfer" from four-year to two-year colleges.

The report—"Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Pre-Degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions," published in partnership with Indiana University's Project on Academic Success—examines students' increasingly complex transfer patterns. It looks at nearly 2.8 million full- and part-time students of all ages, at all institutional types, over a five-year period beginning in 2006.

Transfer rates are similar for full- and part-time students, 32.6 and 33.9 percent, respectively, the study found. More than a quarter of all transfers cross state lines, and students' preferred destination is public two-year institutions (except when those are the origin). The most common time for transfer, the report says, is in a student's second year.

Most data analysis focuses on institutions, the report says, viewing students "as simply entering, progressing linearly, and completing a degree or not." In this presentation, it says, "students are the unit of analysis, and institutions are viewed as stepping stones along a diverse set of educational paths."

College administrators and policymakers need to get a better handle on the issue of student mobility to ensure that they are putting in place effective policies, say the report's authors. "This view could lead to new approaches and metrics that better inform students and institutions about the range of successful enrollment patterns," they write.

And not just students who earn associate degrees should be taken into account, said Donald Hossler, executive director of the research center. "There is a lot of attention given to post-degree transfers, but not about the mobility of students before they earn a degree," he said. "We are presenting information in a way that is seldom done."

Reverse Transfer

Students' transfer patterns reflect the important role of community colleges. Among students who transfer from four-year public institutions, more than half (51.9 percent) transfer "in reverse," to two-year public institutions. And among students who transfer from two-year public colleges, more than a third (37.6 percent) move laterally, to other two-year public colleges. That is nearly as many as transfer from two-year to four-year public institutions: 41.2 percent.

From private colleges—both nonprofit and for-profit—many students also leave for public two-year colleges. From nonprofit colleges, 41.4 percent of transfers go to two-year institutions, and from for-profits, 43.9 percent do.

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[Community Colleges Urged to Bolster Liberal Arts to Help Students Transfer to 4-Year Institutions - November 1, 1989](#)

[Silent Partners in Transfer Admissions - September 19,](#)

The report doesn't delve into why community colleges are a preferred destination. But students' seeking lower tuition costs and a better institutional fit may account for some of the movement, Mr. Hossler said.

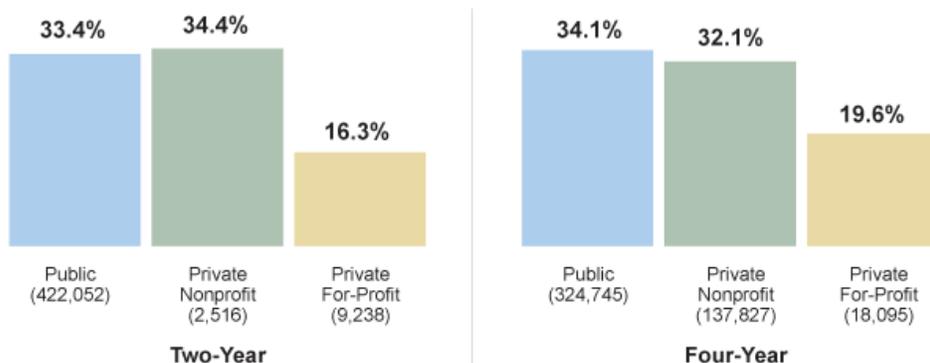
Across all institutional types, transfer rates peak in students' second year, then decrease, with the lowest levels reached in the fifth year.

Still, a surprising number of students make their first transfer during their fourth year of study (13 percent) or fifth year (9 percent). Among students who begin at two-year institutions, 17 percent transfer for the first time in the fourth year, and 11 percent in the fifth.

By that time, there are few services available to students to help them with the transition. Most colleges direct their student-success programs toward first-year students.

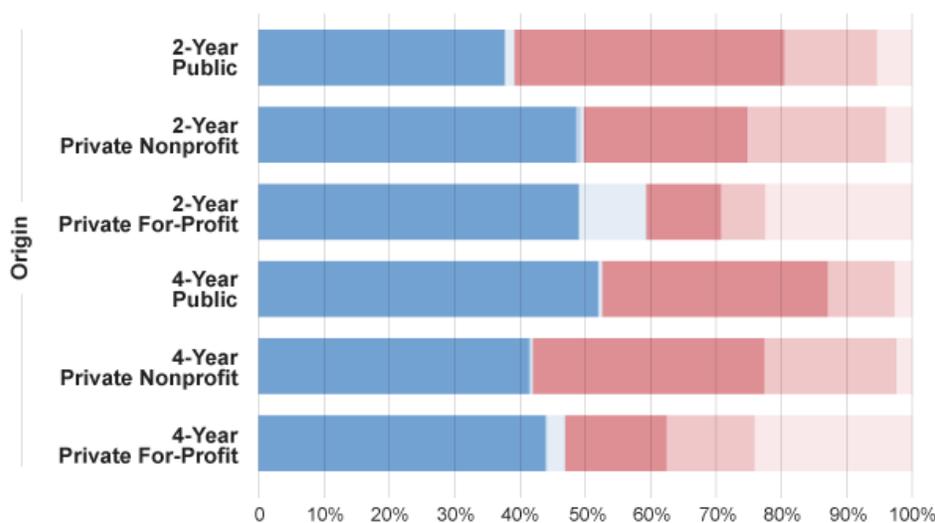
5-Year Transfer Rates by Type of Origin Institution for Students Who First Enrolled in College in the Fall of 2006

% of Students Who Transferred



Origin and Destination of Initial Transfer by Institution Type

Destination



National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

2010

[Transfer From 2-Year Colleges Escapes Many California Hispanics, Report Says - June 8, 2007](#)

[Researchers Suggest Model for Evaluating Success of Transfer Students From 2-Year Institutions - February 22, 2002](#)

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