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Community-College Degree Often Smooths the Path to a B.A., Report Says

By Katherine Mangan

Nearly three-quarters of the students who earned an associate degree and then moved to a four-year college graduated with a bachelor's degree within four years of transferring, according to a "snapshot" report being released on Thursday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The report comes at a time of widespread national concern over low college-completion rates, at both two- and four-year colleges. And it bolsters arguments that the successful completion of a degree at a two-year college sets up transfer students for success later on.

Carrie B. Kisker, director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, a nonprofit research and policy center in Los Angeles, said the report was important for two reasons: "first, because it reinforces the importance of community colleges in increasing the number of bachelor's degrees in America; and second, because it clearly demonstrates that earning an associate degree prior to transfer leads to greater baccalaureate attainment."

She said the report also demonstrated the importance of tracking the outcomes of community-college graduates over a longer period of time.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center releases snapshot reports, which track college enrollment and transfer patterns, throughout the year, drawing on data supplied by more than 3,300 colleges and universities.

The research center examined what happened to students who transferred from two- to four-year colleges in three different academic years: 2005-6, 2006-7, and 2007-8. In each year, it found that about 60 percent of those students ended up with at least a bachelor's degree within four years of transferring. An additional 12 percent of all transfer students were still enrolled in a four-year college but had not yet graduated in the final year of the study.

But when the center looked at the graduation rates among students who had earned associate degrees first, the numbers jumped. About

71 percent of those students had earned bachelor's degree within four years of transferring, and nearly 80 percent either had graduated from or remained enrolled at a four-year college.

'Debunks Some Myths'

Kay M. McClenney, director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, said the report "debunks some myths" about the quality of instruction in community colleges.

"A lot of research indicates that community-college students, when they transfer to four-year colleges and universities, perform academically as well as or better than the native students," she said. But four-year colleges, faced with dozens of transfer agreements with two-year colleges, often deny credit for courses or don't count them toward a student's graduation requirements.

Texas is among many states that have taken steps in recent years to [streamline the transfer process](#) for students moving from two-year to four-year colleges and to support them once they get in.

Texas lawmakers, as part of a strategy to improve graduation rates, last year approved a process to [allow transfer students to receive credentials](#) retroactively when the credits they earned at an upper-level college complete the requirements for an associate degree they started at a two-year college.

Ms. McClenney said she would like to see more states take Florida's approach of allowing a student who has earned an associate degree based on a common core curriculum to transfer as a junior to a four-year college.

"It's still too easy," she said, "for institutions to thwart the pathways of transfer students."

Community colleges also need to do a better job of helping students attain their associate degrees, Ms. McClenney said. Policy makers send mixed messages when they encourage four-year colleges to accept transfer students before they have earned those degrees, she said. Several states offer "transfer associate degrees" that streamline the process.