

Including nontraditional pathways increases completion rates

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A report by the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) (NSC) Research Center highlights the need to change the way completion rates are calculated.

By ignoring students' increasingly diverse paths to graduation, the report, many completion studies "don't fit reality" and thus significantly underreport completion rates, according to [Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates](#). It adds that taking nontraditional pathways into account dramatically drives up the U.S. college completion rate, from 42 percent to 54 percent.

Not a straight path

Among all students who started at a public two-year institution, 36 percent received a degree or certificate within six years, with 12 percent earning a degree at a different institution, the report says.

According to NSC, today's students are much more likely to follow a diverse educational pathway, with many transferring schools before they graduate, enrolling part time or switching between part-time and full-time status. As a result, it's no longer useful for completion studies to focus only on first-time, full-time students who graduate from the same institution where they started.

"Capturing students' completions beyond their starting institution will sizably increase total completion rates observed nationally," the report states.

Key findings of *Completing College* especially relevant to community college leaders include the following:

- More than one in three students (34 percent) who started at public two-year institutions graduated from a different institution.
- Overall, 15 percent of those who started at a two-year college completed a degree at a four-year institution within six years, and nearly two-thirds of them did so without first obtaining an associate degree. (Community colleges typically are not credited for the success of these students under traditional graduation rate measures.)
- Completion rates at two-year institutions were similar for students who started at age 24 or younger (36 percent) and older students (37 percent).
- More than half of full-time students (53 percent) who started at a two-year college completed within six years. Among this group, 38 percent completed at the same college, 3 percent completed at a different two-year institution and 11 percent completed at a four-year institution.
- Students who attend community college part time had a six-year completion rate of 18 percent. Of those students, 16 percent completed at their starting institution, and very few completed at a different two-year college (2 percent) or four-year institution (1 percent).
- Among community college students with mixed part-time and full-time enrollment, 20 percent completed at their starting institution, 3 percent completed at a different two-year college, and 10 percent completed at a four-year college within six years.
- Among students who started at a community college and graduated from a four-year institution within six years, 11 percent of students age 24 or younger did not earn a two-year degree or certificate, while 5 percent of those over age 24 did not earn a two-year degree or certificate.

"With this new look at college completion rates, the clearinghouse can inform the accountability discussion by shifting the traditional focus from the institution to the student in order to include all educational pathways, and as a result, change the national conversation on completion," said NSC President and CEO Rick Torres.

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