

When Students Transfer from Four-Year Colleges to Two-Year Schools

By [Caralee Adams](#) on July 25, 2012 6:22 AM

When it comes to college transfers, the talk is often about students moving from a two-year to a four-year college. But a new [report](#) from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) looks at what happens to "reverse transfer" students — those who go to a community college as a second choice.

Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Pre-Degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions followed first-year college students who started at four-year schools in the fall of 2005 and tracked their enrollment for six years.

It revealed:

- 14.4 percent who started at a four-year institution eventually enrolled at a two-year college outside of the summer months;
- 71 percent of those who reverse transferred stayed in the two-year school for more than one term;
- 16.6 percent of reverse transfer students ever went back to the four-year schools where they began;
- 28.3 percent went back to a different four-year college.

As for completion of a bachelor's degree, the big picture outcomes are not promising for students who take this path. Just one in 10 students who transferred from a four-year school to a two-year one completed a bachelor's degree in six years or were still enrolled back in the original four-year institution. In the six year of the study, two-thirds of the reverse transfer students had failed to get a credential or were not enrolled at a four-year college.

What does this research tell students and higher education leaders?

Reverse transfer is common and students do it for a variety of reasons, says Doug Shapiro, executive research director at the clearinghouse. It doesn't necessarily reflect failure and the transfer often meets the students' needs — to pursue a different career goal or get a two-year degree, he says. The report noted that students often transfer to a community college to save money, because they did not perform well academically, or for personal reasons.

"For policymakers, it's important to recognize the many contributions or ways that students are using two-year institutions for their educational pathways," says Shapiro. "It really shows there are so many ways that community colleges serve students and that is really lost when measures only focus on graduation rates." He adds the research found that those who take summer courses at a community college had higher educational attainment rates than others.

Enrollment managers in higher education should be aware of the diverse pathways that students are taking and look closely at the trends in their state to serve students better, says Shapiro.

While there has not been research on reverse transfer trends in the past, Shapiro says researchers intend to track it in the future to look for changes.

This research is part of a series that will conclude with a fourth installment on college completion rates to be released later this year.