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## **Invisible Transfer Students**

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By Mitch Smith

Enrollment managers have long spoken about the mobility of students, citing the high number of credits transferred in and out of their colleges and grumbling that federal graduation rate calculations fail to account for those transient degree-seekers.

Data released today by the National Student Clearinghouse back those assertions, showing that a third of those who were first-time college students in 2006 had attended at least one other institution by summer 2011.

The study followed 2.8 million full- and part-time students of all ages at every type of institution. Students were counted as transfers if they enrolled at a second institution before earning a degree. Thus, students who moved to a four-year institution after earning an associate degree were not counted, but university students who took a community college class over the summer were. High school students who enrolled in concurrent enrollment courses were not counted as transfers.

The Clearinghouse researchers found that a quarter of those who transferred did so more than once and that the greatest number of moves, 37 percent, took place in a student's second year.

It also found that 43 percent of transfers were to public two-year institutions, making them the most common transfer destination for students from every type of institution except other public two-year colleges.

This study, unique in including part-time students and in following students who might transfer several times, joins a small but growing body of research on the mobility of students.

The findings don't surprise Clifford Adelman, a senior associate with the Institute for Higher Education Policy whose research agenda includes national transfer patterns.

Loyalties to a particular institution or location, which can discourage transferring, have long been eroding, Adelman said. He calls the phenomenon "geomobility" and said it

has called attention to inefficiencies in how governments track graduation numbers. The study's numbers seem to back Adelman's geomobility theory: one-quarter of transfers crossed state lines.

Both Adelman and Clearinghouse senior director of research Doug Shapiro said these numbers call for greater nuance in measuring institutional effectiveness through metrics like graduation rates. The rates colleges report to the federal government now count only traditional, full-time students who remain at one institution. Adelman said that can penalize colleges whose students are more likely to transfer even if those institutions provide a quality education and keep their students on track for a degree.

The oft-cited example of President Obama shows student mobility has existed for decades, though Adelman believes it has increased in recent years. Obama, who left Occidental College after one year and later graduated from Columbia University, would have counted against Occidental's graduation rate and not factored into Columbia's.

Adelman said that's wrong, and cited a recent example of a student whose coursework at Oklahoma State University inspired her to become a marine biologist.

Not seeing much saltwater in Stillwater, the young woman transferred to the University of Rhode Island, and later graduated with honors. Adelman said both colleges should be credited, and certainly not penalized, for their role in educating that student.

"We punish Oklahoma State for helping her find what she really wanted to do," Adelman said. "And as far as Rhode Island's [graduation rate is] concerned, she's a non-person."

Shapiro agreed that the graduation rates institutions report to the government are of limited use and do little to account for hard-to-track transfer students.

"We hope this study will help people to think more broadly about the variety of pathways to student success," he said, "and the range of different measures that can be applied that can get us beyond some of the traditional and limited focus of retention and graduation rates."

That's welcome news to Janet Marling, executive director of the University of North Texas's National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students. Despite anecdotal evidence of growing numbers of transfers, she said the field has long lacked comprehensive data.

"To have any kind of accurate national picture that describes transfer has just been nonexistent," she said. "It used to be just an institutional issue. Now it's an educational issue with folks moving between institutions."

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/02/28/new-study-tracks-student-transfers#ixzz1nghtYVgJ>