

NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE®

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A Deeper Look at the Some College, No Degree Population

During the Past 20 Years, Over 31 Million College Students Left without Getting a Degree, of Whom 4 Million had Made 2 Full Years' Worth of Progress, Says National Student Clearinghouse® Research Center™

Herndon, Virginia, July 29, 2014 – In its most recent Signature Report, [Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion](#), the National Student Clearinghouse® Research Center™ found that 31 million students who enrolled in college during the past 20 years left without receiving a degree or certificate. Almost one-third of this population had only a minimal interaction with the higher education system, having enrolled for just a single term at a single institution, but four million of them made at least two years' worth of progress and left college less than 10 years ago.

Today's adult population includes an increasing proportion of people with some college and no degree, even as states and the federal government are placing greater emphasis on finding ways for students to complete educational credentials. Because most data up to now has focused only on the graduation rates of first-time, full-time students, those with some college, no degree have been overlooked.

The Research Center studied the enrollments of these former students over the past 20 years, across nearly all U.S. degree-granting institutions. The national Signature Report 7 is based on student-level data made available to the Clearinghouse by its more than 3,600 participating colleges and universities, which tracks 96 percent of college enrollments nationwide.

The Clearinghouse report defines a group of "potential completers" as students with no degree or certificate who have completed the equivalent of two or more full academic years of work. These potential completers represent about four million of the 21 million former students who had more than one term of enrollment. These potential completers have already made significant progress to a two- or four-year degree or certificate, and most of them did so by attending only one or two institutions. Although some may still need to transfer some credits before finishing, possible recruitment efforts to encourage them to finish could be very straightforward for colleges and universities to make.

Most potential completers are 24-29 years old – making them the youngest subgroup of the some college, no degree population – and have been out of the postsecondary education system for two to six years, as of December 2013. The age and the number of years since the last enrollment are relevant to policymakers because the information can be used to design outreach and recruitment approaches to reach the greatest number of students. The report also identified a second, broader population of potential re-entry students, those who have two or more enrollment records, called "multiple-term enrollees" as well as provided comparisons of enrollment pathways of potential completers with a sample of completers.

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Additional findings include:

- More than one-third (34.9 percent) of multiple-term enrollees began and ended their postsecondary enrollments within a single year. Over half (56.3 percent) attended only two-year institutions while 16.6 percent attended both two- and four-year institutions.
- Gender distribution across both groups (potential completers and multiple-term enrollees) was very similar, with women making up slightly more than half of the students in each group.
- About three-quarters of “potential completers” (74.3 percent) were under age 30 at the time of their last enrollment; 58.4 percent were still under 30 as of December 2013. Among potential completers men are younger than women: 64 percent of the men were under 30 in December 2013, compared to 54 percent of the women.
- For 17 percent of potential completers, seven or more years have elapsed since their last enrollment. Among those over 30 years old, the figure is 25 percent.
- Most potential completers only attended one (45.6 percent) or two institutions (36 percent).
- One-third of potential completers were enrolled over two to three years, and 71 percent of them had no stop-outs. For another one-third, their enrollments spanned four to six years and included one (41 percent) or more (25 percent) stop-outs.
- Overall, potential completers were much more likely to have stopped out (68 percent) than were completers (40 percent).
- Even though they didn’t finish, potential completers spent more time pursuing a degree than did completers. In general, the total time in postsecondary education institutions (including stop-outs) was longer for potential completers than for completers. Most completers (81.2 percent) had a length of pathway of six years or less compared to 64.4 percent of potential completers.

“As more students choose less-traditional paths to a college degree, the population of those who stop out along the way stands to grow. Many colleges and national organizations are interested in drawing this population back to complete their degrees, but research to inform these efforts is still emerging,” stated Doug Shapiro, Executive Research Director, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. “Our report is designed to help the education community see the diversity as well as similarities in education pathways of this population of former students.”

“Ensuring that students who begin college complete their certificate and degree coursework must be a national priority. These students represent a vast resource of untapped educational capital that the country can ill afford to overlook,” stated Dr. Joni Finney, Practice Professor, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. “A focus on creating viable educational pathways for these students is imperative if individual states and the nation are to realize higher levels of educational attainment. This report represents the most comprehensive data available of students’ attempts to navigate their path toward a college certificate or degree.”

Additionally, a benchmark study, sponsored by five higher education nonprofits, including the Clearinghouse, will be released in the coming weeks, as [recently announced](#) by [InsideTrack](#). The study highlights persistence and completion rates for non-first-time college students nationwide.

About the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is the research arm of the National Student Clearinghouse. The Research Center collaborates with higher education institutions, states, school districts, high schools, and educational organizations as

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part of a national effort to better inform education leaders and policymakers. Through accurate longitudinal data outcomes reporting, the Research Center enables better educational policy decisions leading to improved student outcomes. To learn more, visit <http://research.studentclearinghouse.org>.

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