

What Is a Transfer Student?

By David Radwin and Laura Horn

Preparing students for transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions has long been a primary mission of community colleges, yet there is no widely accepted standard measure of transfer.

Among the additions to this 2014 update of *The Completion Arch*[™] are several indicators of transfer from a community college to a four-year college. Preparing students for transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions has long been a primary, if not the primary, mission of community colleges (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014, ch. 9). Yet to date, there is no widely accepted standard measure of transfer, largely due to the diverse enrollment patterns of community college students. Cohen and Brawer (2009) illustrate the practical challenge of defining transfer by sketching the enrollment history of five hypothetical college juniors at a four-year university who earlier attended a community college:

The first [student] explains that he did his first two years in a community college and the university concurrently, that he took all his general education courses in the community college while he was taking courses in the major field in the university. The second

replies that he started in the university as a freshman, dropped out to spend his next term in the community college, and then came back to the university and has been there ever since. The third says that she took two courses at a community college in the summer after her high school graduation and then matriculated at the university. The fourth studied for one year at a community college ten years earlier and when she decided to come back to school, entered the university as a sophomore. The fifth finished her first two years at the community college and transferred as a junior in mid-year. How many of the five are “transfer students?” *None*, according to some reports; *all*, according to others. (p. 64, emphasis original)

In other words, while one definition of transfer students includes virtually any four-year college students who previously attended a community college, other definitions might exclude groups

This research brief was produced by RTI International for *The Completion Arch*[™], available at www.completionarch.org, which presents indicators of community college student progress and success within a framework of five key areas. Each brief in this series highlights a particular topic, describing the context, strengths, and limitations of existing measures and how they can inform policymakers, educators, journalists, researchers, foundations, and the public.

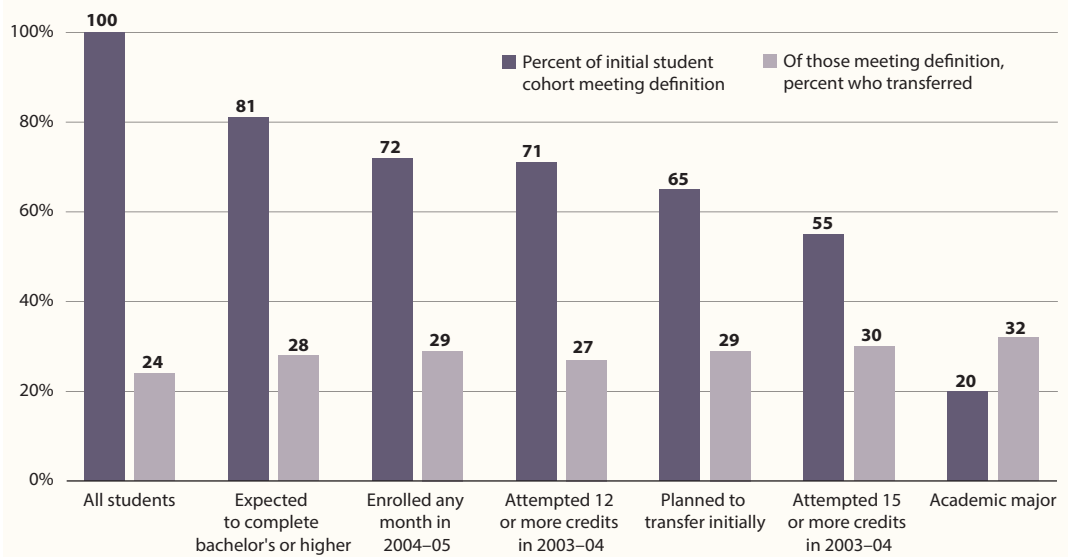
such as those who attended a four-year institution before community college, those who enrolled in community college exclusively prior to the fall of their freshman year, those who had a long break in enrollment between community college and the four-year college, or those who transferred in the middle of an academic year. Because colleges, states, and researchers do not share a consistent definition of a transfer student, it is difficult to make valid comparisons of such students across sources.

An equally important issue is defining which students should be considered “transfer-seeking” for the purposes of calculating transfer rates—that is, the proportion of students who actually do transfer among all transfer-seeking students. As is the case with “degree-seeking” students, it is probably impossible for community colleges to accurately discern which entering students truly intend to transfer to a four-year institution, and even if they could, students’ educational goals are often uncertain and may change over time.

In practice, transfer rates are highly sensitive to the specification of the denominator of transfer-seeking students. For example, figure 1

presents seven plausible definitions of transfer-seeking and the proportion of U.S. community college students that meet that definition (based on an earlier study by Bradburn & Hurst, 2001). Only 81 percent of community college students initially intended to earn a bachelor’s degree, and increasingly smaller proportions of students enrolled the following year, attempted 12 credit hours in their first year, initially planned to transfer to a four-year college, attempted 15 credit hours in their first year, or pursued an academic (that is, not vocational) major. The smaller the group, the higher the transfer rate, so that the transfer rate for the smallest group, students with academic majors, was 32 percent compared with 24 percent for students overall. Other studies based on state data reach parallel conclusions (Hom, 2009; Horn & Lew, 2007a, 2007b; Shulock, Moore, Ceja, & Lang, 2007). Even within a state community college system, the definition can vary over time. For example, in 2012, California announced it would begin reporting transfer rates for students who earned 6 or more credits in a community college instead of those who earned at least 12 credits (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2012, n.d.).

Figure 1 Among community college students beginning in 2003–04, percentage of initial cohort meeting each definition of potential transfer, and of those students meeting the definition, percentage who transferred to four-year institutions by spring 2009



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09).

A further complication is that these measures do not account for how many credits are transferred by community college students and how many students transfer enough credits to attain junior or upper-division standing in a four-year institution. An indicator added this year uses data from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS:09) components of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study of 2004/09 (BPS:04/09) from the National Center for Education Statistics, to tabulate the number of credits that community college students transfer to four-year colleges (which may be less than the number of credits they earn in community college).

Ideally, transfer students would earn at least 60 transferable credits in community college, equivalent to two academic years of full-time enrollment and half of the 120 credits typically required for a bachelor's degree;¹ however, in reality, relatively few students meet this standard. On average, first-time beginning community college students transfer just 30 credits to four-year public colleges and 20 credits to

four-year private nonprofit colleges, and about one-fifth of these students do not transfer any credits at all (Simone, 2014, tables 8, 9). Because many first-time beginning students briefly enroll in community college just before starting at four-year colleges, often shortly after graduating from high school, some definitions of transfer students exclude individuals who earned relatively few (less than 10 or 12) credits at the community college (Bradburn & Hurst, 2001; McCormick, 1999), who enrolled in the summer between graduating high school and enrolling in a different institution in the fall, or who withdrew without earning any credits (Adelman, 2005, 2006). Community college students who transfer fewer than 60 credits effectively start as freshmen or sophomores at four-year institutions rather than as juniors and need more than two academic years of full-time enrollment to complete a bachelor's degree. Nonetheless, they may still benefit from their community college experience in less obvious ways (for example, by completing noncredit developmental education or study skill courses).

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¹Many bachelor's degrees require earning more than 120 credits (Johnson, Reidy, Droll, & LeMon, 2012).

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