Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count Initiative

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students.

Introduction

The Achieving the Dream initiative focuses on the use of longitudinal cohort tracking to follow student performance over a longer period of time. Traditionally, colleges have used cross-sectional data when looking at students: a “snapshot” of student performance is taken for a specific term, such as capturing the number of students who enrolled at the college in Fall 2005. An additional snapshot, or cross-section, of student enrollment might be collected in the winter quarter. While these snapshots might tell us the total number of students enrolled at the college at any given time, they don’t show if the students in Winter 2005 are the same as the ones that were enrolled in the fall term, or if these students had enrolled in previous quarters. Cohort tracking, on the other hand, follows the same group of students over multiple years and captures how they perform across the institution, even if they stop out for a term or longer.

**TERMINOLOGY**

- **COHORT:** A group of individuals that have common characteristics
- **CROSS-SECTIONAL:** multiple observations of the same group but different individuals at a certain point in time
- **FTIC:** First Time in College, students who have never attended a college or university before now
- **LONGITUDINAL:** multiple observations of the same individuals over a long period of time
- **TRACKING:** Monitoring student performance in all classes each semester
- **TRANSFER:** Carrying credit for courses from one institution to another, like from a community college to a university

Achieving the Dream Cohorts

For Achieving the Dream, student cohorts are created for each year. The cohorts are composed of all degree/certificate seeking undergraduate students (full- and part-time) entering TCC for the first time during the fall term of the year. The following explains how each of these components applies to TCC’s student population:
Students Must Be Entering TCC for the First Time During the Fall Term of the Year. Since the cohort model attempts to track the experiences of students for the duration of their time at the college, cohort groups are formed as students enter the institution for the first time. All students who enrolled in TCC for the first time in Fall 2003 were initially counted in the cohort regardless of whether they had attended a different college in the past or not. For example, of the 9,484 students who enrolled at the college in Fall 2003, 6,234 students were returning and had at some point in the past taken coursework at TCC. The remaining 3,250 students were new at the college, and these students were initially included into the Achieving the Dream cohort.

Students Must Be Degree- or Certificate-Seeking Undergraduate Students. The goal of cohort tracking is to follow students over a period of multiple terms, which works best when measuring students who intend to be at the college for more than one term. In order to do this, new students at TCC were only kept in the Achieving the Dream cohorts if they fit the State’s definition of “degree-seeking.” The State defines “degree-seeking” by two factors: student intent and planned length of attendance at an institution. This means that students who identified themselves as intending to complete a degree or certificate program or to transfer to a four-year institution were kept in the cohort group. Of these students, any student who did not plan to attend TCC for at least one year was taken out. For example, of the 3,250 new TCC students in Fall 2003, 1,471 students at the college planned to earn a certificate or degree or transfer, but 337 of these students planned to be at TCC for less than a year. Thus, only 1,134 students were considered “degree-seeking” and were included in the cohort.
**College-Student Status.** The last step in creating the cohorts was to make sure that the cohorts focused on student populations on campus most impacted by the efforts of the institution. Two-hundred-and-thirty-three students met the cohort criteria as being new to the college and degree-seeking who were also dual-enrolled in the college’s Running Start program. After these students were removed from the 1,134 students in the cohort, 901 students remained. This means the final number of students tracked in the Fall 2003 cohort was 901.

**Once Part of a Cohort, Always Part of a Cohort**
When a student is designated a member of a specified cohort, he or she will never be included in another cohort. The student will also remain in the cohort even if he or she transfers to another institution, drops out of TCC, stops out (skips one or more enrollment periods), or hasn’t fulfilled the TCC’s requirements to receive a certificate or degree. As a new cohort is captured each year, the data we have on student performance will grow, and patterns and trends will emerge. These long-term patterns can show us where consistent gaps exist in student performance and outcomes and which students are most impacted by these gaps. With this knowledge, we will be better prepared to implement strategies that close these gaps in student performance and help all of our students succeed.

**Figure RB2.02: Composition of Achieving the Dream Fall 2004 Cohort**

Achieving the Dream Fall 2004

Students Enrolled In Fall 2004: 8,784

- **SUBTRACT** Returning Students: 6,068
- **FTIC* & New Transfer Students:** 2,716

- **SUBTRACT** Non-Degree Seeking Students: 1,667
- Degree-Seeking Students Only: 1,049

- **SUBTRACT** Running Start Students: 233
- Fall 2004 Cohort: 816

(*FTIC=First Time In College)
Figure RB2.03: Composition of Achieving the Dream Fall 2005 Cohort

- Achieving the Dream Fall 2005 Students Enrolled in Fall 2005: 8,724
  - Subtract Returning Students: 5,942
  - FTIC & New Transfer Students: 2,782
  - Subtract Non-Degree Seeking Students: 1,741
  - Degree-Seeking Students Only: 1,041
  - Fall 2005 Cohort: 947

Figure RB2.04: Total Number of Students in All Achieving the Dream Cohorts

- Achieving the Dream Fall 2003 Total Students in Cohort: 901
- Achieving the Dream Fall 2004 Total Students in Cohort: 816
- Achieving the Dream Fall 2005 Total Students in Cohort: 947
- Total Number of Students in All Cohorts: 2,664