



## College Readiness and the Potentially Overlapping Outcomes of Community College Entrants

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### Executive Summary

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With open enrollment and comprehensive missions, community colleges provide opportunities for postsecondary education to a wide variety of students who enroll for myriad reasons (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2005; Bryant, 2001). The inclusive nature of American community colleges is intended to facilitate equality of higher educational opportunity (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Dougherty, 1994). Yet, given the diverse goals and interests of community college students, explaining their postsecondary educational outcomes remains a complicated task. The challenge in explaining postsecondary outcomes is especially acute in the current policy environment that focuses on degree completion with traditional reporting mechanisms that do not account for transfer as a student outcome.

A related issue in studying community college entrants stems from complex interrelationships between the different community college outcomes. That is, a community college entrant could earn a certificate, earn an associate degree, transfer to a four-year college (vertical transfer), or attain some combination of the three. Further, the relationships between the outcomes, or the specific outcome patterns, may in turn be related to other educational outcomes, such as bachelor's degree completion.

A complementary issue associated with the open enrollment of community colleges is that students initially enroll at community colleges with varying degrees of college readiness. While many community college entrants lack "college readiness" and need remediation or developmental coursework (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), other community college students are

adequately prepared to move into college-level work (Smalley, Lichtenberger, & Brown, 2010; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2012; Mullin, 2012). This report focuses on a multifaceted approach to college readiness using benchmarks developed by the ACT (ACT, 2010).

The focus of this report is to describe the diverse, potentially overlapping range of student outcomes for community college entrants, such as vertical transfer, earning an associate degree, or earning a certificate while taking into consideration differences in college readiness as well as other student characteristics.

### How Is College Readiness Distributed Among the Community College Entrants?

The distribution of college readiness among the community college entrants varied from that of the overall high school graduating cohort and suggested that, as a group, the students who initially enrolled at community colleges were less ready for college than the overall cohort. Further, the rate of initial community college enrollment varied for students across the benchmark categories. Members of the high school graduating cohort who met only one of the benchmarks had the highest rates of initial community college enrollment, perhaps due to a need for remediation in one or more subject areas. However, the findings also demonstrate that a sizable portion of community college entrants is well-prepared to make the postsecondary transition as one in five has met three or more benchmarks. This is one reason the outcome-related results are provided separately for each college readiness group.

## **How Do the College Readiness Benchmark Patterns Relate to Outcomes?**

- Community college entrants meeting all of the benchmarks had the highest overall outcome attainment rate. While three-quarters of the students who were college ready in all subjects attained an outcome from a community college (such as earning a certificate, associate degree, transferring, or some combination of the three), only 42.4% of those missing all of the benchmarks attained an outcome.
- Students meeting three or more of the benchmarks had the highest associate degree completion rates (roughly 42%). These rates of associate degree completion were more than twice the rate for students missing all of the benchmarks (20.4%) and slightly more than 13 percentage points higher than the students who met only one benchmark (combined rate of 28.9%).
- There was some variation in outcome attainment when the information was disaggregated by the actual college readiness subject areas. For example, while 28.9% of the students who met a singular benchmark earned an associate degree, 32.2% of the students who met only Math and 29.6% of the students who met only English earned an associate degree.
- The vertical transfer rates to four-year institutions varied from 63.8% (meeting all of the benchmarks) on the high end to 29.2% on the low end (missing all the benchmarks).
- Among those transferring to a four-year college, the proportion of community college entrants within each college readiness category that also earned an associate degree increased along with the number of benchmarks met. For example, roughly 37% of the transfer students who missed all of the benchmarks earned an associate degree, whereas slightly more than half of the vertical transfer students who met three or more of the benchmarks also earned an associate degree.

## **Discussion**

Although a disproportionately high number of community college entrants from the Illinois high school class of 2003 was less than ready for college, as measured by ACT college readiness benchmarks, a sizable portion (about one in five) of community college entrants met three or more benchmarks. These better prepared community college entrants tended to fare quite well in terms of outcome attainment. Nearly three-quarters of community college entrants who met all of the benchmarks and over 70% of community college entrants meeting three benchmarks either earned a community college credential (nearly all were associate degrees), vertically transferred to a four-year college, or did both.

There were varying degrees of community college success among the less-prepared community college entrants based on the specific college readiness benchmarks that were met. Among the community college entrants meeting only one of the benchmarks, there were relatively high rates of overall outcome attainment, specifically for those meeting either the Math or English benchmark. Further, among the students who met two of the benchmarks, those meeting the benchmarks in both Math and English had the highest overall rate of outcome attainment, and in a few cases it was higher than students meeting three of the benchmarks.

Among the community college entrants who missed all of the readiness benchmarks, more than two out of every five (42.4%) attained a community college outcome. Yet, disproportionately fewer of the students who missed all of the benchmarks and made the transition to a four-year college earned a community college credential prior to transferring, as compared with community college entrants meeting more of the benchmarks. This could be problematic as such students would also be at a higher relative risk of dropping out of their respective four-year colleges without earning a bachelor's degree, leaving them without any college degree.

### *The Gender Gap*

The current study demonstrates how the gender gap favoring female students widens further when moving from enrollment to the postsecondary outcomes of community college entrants (Smalley et al., 2010). A considerably higher proportion of female community college entrants throughout all of the college readiness levels either earned a community college credential or transferred to a four-year college. Relatedly, among the male community college entrants who made the transition to a four-year college, considerably fewer earned an associate degree prior to transferring—this was evident both in terms of the actual rate of transfer without an associate degree and the proportion of male vertical transfers lacking an associate degree. When placed in the context of gender differences in bachelor's degree completion rates, males are considerably less likely to complete a bachelor's program either as four-year college entrants (Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2012; Smalley et al., 2010) or as vertical transfer students (Smalley et al., 2010). Given that there are fewer male community college entrants earning associate degrees prior to transfer, considerably more males would be at risk of leaving college without any postsecondary credential.

### *Differences in terms of ethnicity/race*

Across all of the college readiness categories, White and Asian community college entrants had substantially higher rates of associate degree completion in comparison to their traditionally underserved minority counterparts. Differences in terms of vertical transfer rates were somewhat more muted when comparing the well-prepared White and Asian community college entrants to their similarly-prepared underserved peers. However, among the less-prepared community college entrants, traditionally underserved students had lower vertical transfer rates than similarly-ready White and Asian students—this was coupled with considerably lower proportions of traditionally underserved community college entrants earning an associate degree prior to transfer. The low rate of associate degree completion prior to transfer could be problematic, as previous research has shown that traditionally underserved vertical transfer students have comparatively lower rates of bachelor's degree

completion (Smalley et al., 2010). This, along with the results of the current study, suggests that traditionally underserved vertical transfer students would be at a greater relative risk of dropping out of college without any postsecondary degree since fewer earn associate degrees prior to transfer and fewer complete bachelor's degrees after making the transition to a four-year college.

### *Family income and college ready students*

Consideration of college readiness appeared to eliminate some of the achievement gap in community college outcome attainment that has traditionally favored students from wealthier families (Smalley et al., 2010). The differences in overall community college outcome attainment between well-prepared students from middle-income and high-income families were extremely small. Still, the rates of attainment for the specific outcomes differed by income group. The community college entrants from high income families had substantially higher vertical transfer rates, while students from middle income families had substantially higher rates of associate degree completion in addition to higher rates of vertical transfer after earning an associate degree.

### *Regional differences*

Community college entrants from the Northeast region of the state—the Chicago suburbs—appeared to have more of a singular focus on transitioning to a four-year college, as throughout all of the college readiness categories they tended to have the lowest community college credential completion rates and the highest vertical transfer rates without a community college credential. Students from more rural locales, such as the Southeast, Southwest, and Northwest regions, had significantly higher rates of community college credential completion even after accounting for college readiness. In terms of eliminating geographic disparities in educational attainment, the results suggested that community colleges seem to be providing opportunities to students with varying levels of college readiness from more rural locales—such as the Southeast region—not only for associate degree and certificate attainment but also as a means to transition to a four-year college.

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## Policy Implications: The Community College as Part of the Completion Agenda

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### Importance of Associate Degrees

More must be done to provide select groups of community college entrants with information regarding the benefits of completing an associate degree regardless of their intention to transfer to a four-year college and earn a bachelor's degree. The information is particularly important for community college entrants making the transition to four-year colleges who are at risk of not completing their bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, many of the groups of students with relatively high rates of vertical transfer without an associate degree have traditionally maintained relatively low rates of bachelor's degree completion—namely males, traditionally underserved minority students, and those who are less prepared for college. The associate degree could serve not only as insurance in the event a bachelor's degree is not earned, but as a building block towards bachelor's completion.

### Reverse Articulation Initiative

Vertical transfer students at risk of not completing a bachelor's degree would benefit from a current policy initiative that attempts to increase the proportion of degree holders by facilitating the exchange of information between two-year degree granting and baccalaureate-granting institutions. This initiative is sometimes called “reverse articulation,” “providing credit when it's due,” or “reverse transfer.” As policies are developed related to reverse articulation, policymakers should take into consideration the groups of vertical transfer students at risk of leaving college without any degree. Reverse articulation typically involves the development of policies allowing vertical transfer students to apply credits earned at a four-year institution to the completion of an associate degree begun at a community college. The motivation behind such policies is that if vertical transfer students are leaving their respective community colleges without an

associate degree, it would be beneficial to establish methods for determining if the credits earned at their receiving four-year college would fulfill the remaining associate degree requirements at their sending community college. Therefore, reverse articulation policies have the potential to increase the number of associate degrees earned.

Generally, in order for a vertical transfer student to be eligible for reverse articulation of credit they must leave the community college in good academic standing with their total credit hours over a certain threshold which varies by state. For example, some states require 45 community college credit hours prior to the vertical transfer for eligibility (Garber, Kleemann, Marshall, Parke, & Wunderle, 2010; Mangan, 2011). In moving towards bachelor's degree completion at their four-year college, these transfer students sometimes successfully complete the coursework that was required for an associate degree at their sending community college. With a reverse articulation policy in place, the four-year institution provides the information to the sending community college, and a degree audit takes place. Transcripts are requested to verify the degree audit, then, if the credits from the four-year institution fulfill the remaining associate degree requirements at the sending community college, the student is formally awarded the associate degree by that community college.

The benefits of the reverse articulation initiative to the typical vertical transfer student are fairly straightforward, especially if the student has characteristics associated with an increased risk of dropping out of a bachelor's degree program. Simply put, more students would be earning college degrees. Community colleges would also benefit as they would now be able to report increased degree completion rates for their community college entrants.

The full report is available at [www.siu.edu/ierc](http://www.siu.edu/ierc)  
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