



College Readiness and the Potentially Overlapping Outcomes of Community College Entrants

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Executive Summary

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.