

The Community College Penalty and Bachelor's Degree Completion: Fact or Fiction?

Eric J. Lichtenberger and Cecile Dietrich



Rationale:

Research examining the relationship between initial community college enrollment and bachelor's completion have shown mixed results with some studies indicating a clear penalty for community college enrollment and other studies showing no penalty, partly due to the point at which the given study began tracking the community college students: at initial community college entrance or after vertical transfer to a four-year college. We adopted the latter view while simultaneously controlling for student background characteristics, as well as high school and college contexts.

Purpose:

To examine the impact of taking the community college to four-year transfer pathway on bachelor's degree completion.

Methods:

Data sources: Data from ACT and the National Student Clearinghouse specific to the Illinois public high school graduating class of 2003. Postsecondary outcomes were nationally tracked from 2003 through 2010.

Participants: Prior to propensity score matching, 23,676 high school graduates who matriculated to college were followed over seven academic years: included 2,154 community college transfer students and 21,522 four-year rising juniors.

Research Design: Quantitative and quasi-experimental; nearest neighbor propensity score matching with a post-treatment adjustment. Matching with replacement was used.

Analysis: Estimates of treatment effect made by matching community college transfers with observationally equivalent rising four-year college juniors graduating from the same high schools and attending equally selective four-year colleges.

Findings:

- Prior to matching, the academic profile of the community college transfer students was significantly weaker from that of the rising four-year college juniors.
- 85% of the community college transfer students identified in the study had earned a bachelor's degree within five academic years of transitioning to a four-year college.
- *No community college penalty was evident.* Community college transfer students were just as likely to complete a bachelor's degree as rising four-year college juniors when matching on key factors.

Policy Implications:

The community college to four-year pathway is a viable option for many students in terms of bachelor's degree completion. As a result, policymakers should:

- Continue to develop baseline information about statewide transfer performance as the state's longitudinal data system is fully implemented (Wellman, 2002);
- Set goals for institutional performance related to community college to four-year transfer (Wellman, 2002);
- Help community college transfer students face their financial aid future by developing information and incentives that fully span their undergraduate enrollment from a community college to a four-year institution (Wellman, 2002; Handel, 2011).