Lost credits hold back transfer students, study finds

Submitted by Paul Fain on March 19, 2014 - 3:00am

Students are much less likely to earn a four-year degree if they first enroll at a community college. A key reason, according to a newly released study, is lost credits in the transfer process.

The research also dumps cold water on several other explanations for why many community college students fail to eventually complete bachelor’s degrees, such as assumptions about lowered expectations, a vocational focus or inadequate academic rigor during their time at two-year colleges.

David B. Monaghan, a doctoral student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and Paul Attewell, a professor of education there, are the study’s co-authors. They found that lost credits – either for community college courses that four-year institutions did not accept or did not count toward a major – were a serious stumbling block for many transfer students.

Inefficiencies around the transfer of credits have a “substantial effect on whether you graduate,” Monaghan said.

Many students must retake courses they completed in community college.

“About 14 percent of transfer students in the study essentially began anew after transferring,” according to the paper. “Their new institution accepted fewer than 10 percent of their community college credits.”

About 58 percent of students were able to bring at least 90 percent of their community college credits with them to a four-year institution, the researchers found. The remaining 28 percent lost between 10 and 89 percent of their credits.

Students who get almost all their community college credits to transfer are 2.5 times more likely to earn a four-year degree than students who bring along less than half of their credits.

The Transfer ‘Chasm’

The journal Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis published the study today, which the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded. It is dubbed “The Community College Route to the Bachelor’s Degree.”

The research was based on a nationally representative group of 13,000 first-time college students who enrolled in 2004 in either community colleges or four-year institutions. It focused on students who said they were interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree. They were interviewed when they first enrolling and then three and six years later. The data included transcript information, so researchers could track students’
Lost credits hold back transfer students, study finds @insidehighered

Academic progress.

Overall bachelor's completion rates lag for students who begin at community college versus a four-year institution, according to the study. The gap is 17 percentage points, even after controlling for various background factors among the two groups of students, such as grades or hours worked at jobs.

Furthermore, students who start at community college have a retention rate after eight semesters that trails their peers who start at four-year institutions by 9 percentage points (successfully earned associate degrees did not count as completions in this study).

However, community college transfer students are just as likely to earn a bachelor's degree as equivalent students who started at a four-year college, according to the study. The authors cite recent numbers from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which found that 60 percent of students who transfer to a four-year institution from a community college earn a bachelor's degree within four years of transferring. That figure jumps to 71 percent for transfer students who first earn an associate degree.

So where's the bottleneck? Part of the answer is that many students who try to transfer fail to do so.

The study found that among community college students who earned roughly 60 credits and said they wanted to go on to earn a bachelor's degree, only about 60 percent successfully transferred to a four-year institution.

The researchers said they were not able to pinpoint factors that prevent students from transferring, but those issues are apparently serious enemies of the national college completion push.

"Jumping that chasm is probably a big part of the fall-off in completion rates," said Monaghan.

The so-called "cooling out" effect, however, does not appear to be a valid explanation of why community college students sometimes fail to earn bachelor's degrees, according to study. That theory holds that students get discouraged in community college and decide it is more realistic to set their sights on an associate degree or certificate instead of a four-year degree.

The study cited research that found students actually "heating up" in their bachelor's degree aspirations as they move through college, which obviously contradicts the cooling-out theory.

Community colleges also do not appear to be dispiriting or lackluster academically, according to the paper. That's because lagging academic progress does not appear until the third year of students' enrollment.

In addition, because transfer students have the same completion rates as students who first enrolled in four-year institutions, the study said "one can conclude, at least for successful transfers, that the education received at a community college was adequate preparation for completion of a bachelor's degree."

One way the two-year sector can help students avoid red tape around transfer is to start offering their own bachelor's degrees. Some critics call that "mission creep," but community colleges in more than 20 states are already doing it. California's huge two-year system is currently mulling the option.

The study did not consider whether community colleges should get into the four-year degree business. But when it comes to graduation rates, Monaghan said "a huge part of the problem is that transfer process."

Community Colleges

Source URL: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/03/19/lost-credits-hold-back-transfer-students-study-finds?
width=775&height=500&iframe=true

Links:
Lost credits hold back transfer students, study finds @insidehighered