

## TEST DRIVE:

### *Six States Pilot Better Ways to Measure and Compare Community College Performance*

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges offer broad access to postsecondary education through open admissions and more affordable and flexible programs of study. Unfortunately, improved access has not translated into higher levels of college completion, particularly for low-income students, students of color, and others who traditionally have not fared well in college. In the past 20 years, according to OECD statistics, the United States has dropped from first to tenth in the world in the percent of young adults, aged 25-34, with an Associate's degree or higher.

Faced with burgeoning enrollments and stagnating completion rates, states have a growing interest in strengthening their community college data and performance measurement systems to better track student progress and success. Since 2006, six states in the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* initiative—Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia—have taken on this challenge of crafting new intermediate and final measures of student progress. These states have worked together to design a more complete and accurate way of measuring student performance over time and comparing results to others nationwide.

The six-state Data Work Group began the process by addressing the limitation of the current federal approach to measuring community college performance. The current federal method for evaluating the performance of the nation's colleges amounts to a single,

simple question: how many students have earned a degree or certificate in a certain amount of time? Each year, the federal Graduation Rate Survey asks colleges to report the number of full-time, first-time undergraduates who have completed a degree or certificate within 150 percent of the “normal time” to completion. For students at four-year colleges, this is six years.

Community college students enrolled in Associate's degree programs have three years.

For community colleges, the federal method is too simplistic. One significant limitation is that it does not track outcomes for part-time students, even though large proportions of community college students start their postsecondary education part time, as they juggle the demands of school, work, and family. Another major limitation is that the federal approach defines success in only one way—earning a degree or certificate. This is despite the fact that an important part of the mission of many community colleges is transferring students to four-year institutions, so they may pursue a Bachelor's degree, whether or not they have completed an earlier credential. In addition, the three-year time limit the federal government allows students to achieve a successful outcome is not long enough for many community college students, especially for those whose enrollment patterns fluctuate due to work and family obligations.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

*Test Drive* was prepared for Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed (earn degrees, earn certificates, or transfer to other institutions to continue their studies).

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## DESIGNING A NEW APPROACH TO MEASURING PERFORMANCE

To address these limitations, the Work Group made several important modifications to the current federal method of measuring community college performance and carefully tested the new measures to assess their accuracy (*see table*). Among the most significant changes were: extending the time frame for tracking student outcomes from three years after initial enrollment to six years; tracking the performance of students who initially enrolled in college part time; and expanding the list of successful outcomes to include transfer to a four-year institution, as well as having made substantial progress toward a degree by a student's sixth year.

The Work Group's pilot testing demonstrated that this more nuanced approach to defining and measuring student success yielded more accurate and useful information about our nation's community colleges. Extending

the time frame for tracking student outcomes was one of the most important modifications. Increasing the time frame from three to six years resulted in a substantial increase in student success rates, particularly for part-time students and those who started in developmental education. For example, in Florida the rate for students who began full time nearly doubled—from 19 percent to 35 percent. For students who began part time, graduation rates nearly tripled—from 7 percent to 20 percent.

Not all of the Work Group's methodological changes resulted in higher success rates. Including part-time students in the analysis actually lowered the success rates of community college systems. But the six Work Group states still preferred this method; the data were more accurate and therefore more valuable in analyzing and comparing institutional performance, particularly for some of their most vulnerable students.

## COMPARING COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERFORMANCE MEASURES

	Current Federal Method	Achieving the Dream State Work Group Method
<b>Prior enrollment</b>	First-time-in-college students only	Same as federal method
<b>Intent at time of enrollment</b>	Only students seeking a certificate or degree	Same as federal method
<b>Enrollment status</b>	Full-time students only	Full-time and part-time students
<b>Successful outcomes</b>	Earned degree or certificate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Earned degree or certificate (with or without transfer)</li> <li>- Transferred without award</li> <li>- Enrolled in year six with at least 30 college credit hours</li> </ul>
<b>Time frame</b>	Three years (150% of "normal time" to completion)	Six years
<b>Tracking students who transfer within two-year-college sector</b>	Reporting is based on individual colleges; does not track outcomes of students who transfer to another college; colleges report them simply as "transferred out"	Reporting is based on statewide community college system; tracks outcomes of students within the system (and therefore across community colleges)
<b>Controlling for factors associated with different likelihoods of success</b>	Part-time students excluded from analysis; no disaggregation of results by age at initial enrollment	Disaggregated results by part-time and full-time status and age at initial enrollment

## RESULTS OF TESTING PROCESS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To test the modifications to the traditional performance measurement system, the Work Group used data from each state’s community college system. Each state tracked all first-time community college students (full-time and part-time) for six years from their date of entry. (The only exception was North Carolina, which had only five years of data for this analysis.) As with the federal method, the states included only those students who were seeking a certificate or degree.

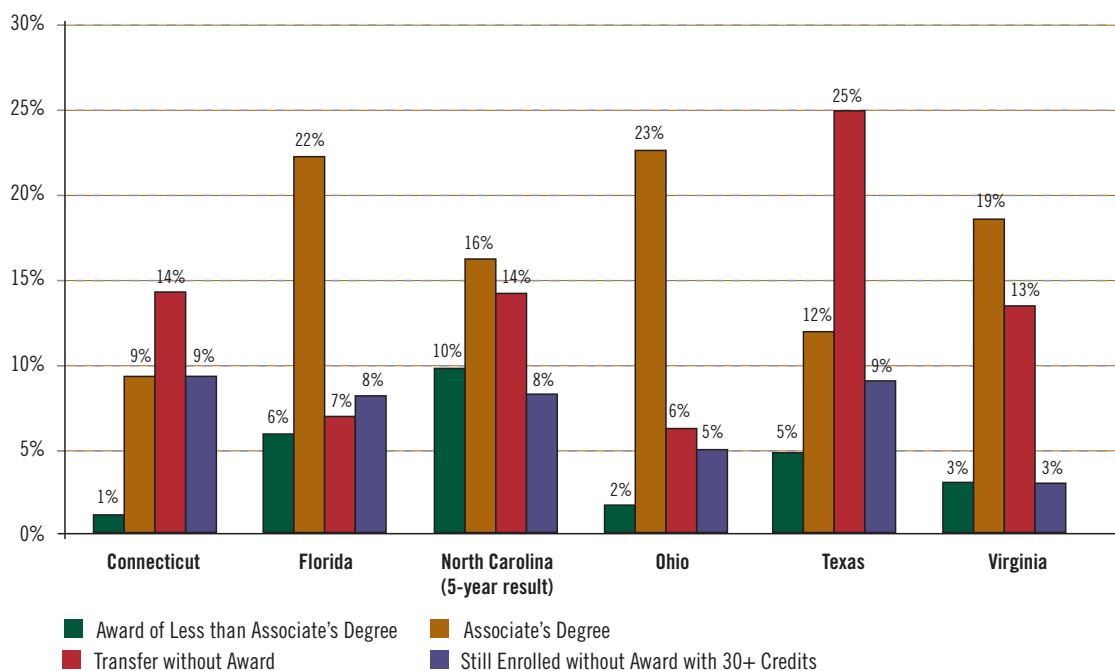
The six states examined the outcomes achieved by all students and then by student subgroups disaggregated by age and enrollment status. The percentage of students who achieved a successful outcome within six years—earning an award, transferring to a four-year institution, or remaining enrolled with at least 30 credits—ranged from 33 percent in Connecticut to 51 percent in Texas (*see figure*).

Other findings from the analysis included substantially higher success rates for full-time and younger students and significant differences in transfer patterns and rate among states.

A comparative analysis of the pilot test results demonstrated the many critical ways that state policy can drive outcomes for community college students. For example, significant differences among Work Group states in rates of transfer to four-year colleges and in the rates of students who transfer with or without an Associate’s degree reflected important differences in each state’s higher education policies and in the role of community colleges in that state’s postsecondary system.

The Cross-State Data Work Group plans to continue to refine its approach to measuring community college performance, expanding its analysis to include more recent cohorts of entering students in order to track changes in system performance over time. Several other *Achieving the Dream* states will be joining the Work Group and participating in this ongoing comparative analysis. In addition, the Work Group has identified several other priorities to help states use longitudinal data to improve community college outcomes. These include: developing intermediate benchmarks to help determine whether students early in their college careers are on track toward a successful outcome; analyzing the performance of different student subgroups; and assessing the benefits of various interventions to help increase success rates.

### STUDENT SUCCESS RATES USING STATE WORK GROUP METHOD



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This policy brief was prepared by Jobs for the Future and the members of the *Achieving the Dream* Cross-State Data Work Group who spent countless hours analyzing data and testing preliminary measures to arrive at a comprehensive and valid set of success measures. Work Group members also contributed rich descriptions of their states' policy context, and they reviewed and edited several drafts of the document. The members of the Work Group who coauthored the report are: Gabriela Borcoman, Ph.D., Senior Program Director, Planning and Accountability, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; J. Keith Brown, Associate Vice President for Research and Performance Management, North Carolina Community College System; Nancy Copa, Research and Evaluation

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