

The Washington Post

Grade Point

# Community college students are filling the rolls at four-year institutions

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By **Danielle Douglas-Gabriel** June 28 at 12:38 PM

Public colleges and universities are drawing a large percentage of their students from community colleges, where nearly two-thirds of students transfer to a four-year institution, according to a report released Tuesday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The nonprofit group found that two in five students who obtained an associate degree in the 2009-2010 academic year went on to complete a bachelor's within six years. Researchers say students under 20 years of age were most likely to take the associate-to-bachelor's pathway, with almost 61 percent earning a bachelor's degree within six years. Of the students with associate degrees who pursued a bachelor's, 66 percent finished within three years, the report said.

"Students are consuming postsecondary education in smaller chunks today," said Doug Shapiro, executive research director of the Clearinghouse. "They're increasingly starting at a community college whether that's to save money, stay closer to home or be able to work and care for their families."

The Clearinghouse report offers important insight into the changing landscape of higher education. Although 40 percent of students pursuing a degree are in community colleges, states have been slashing funding to such institutions. An estimated 96 percent of community colleges receive less than 5 percent of their budget from state funding, with states like Arizona cutting all appropriations to its community colleges.

As the population of students entering community colleges continues to grow, higher education experts say state legislatures will need to reconsider how they allocate funding. Shapiro said it is also important for state policymakers to explore whether delays in graduating are the result of student behavior, transfer policies or state articulation policies.

Researchers found that nearly two-thirds of students who earn a certificate enroll in additional college courses, and 26 percent earn an associate degree, bachelor's or both. Students under 20 with certificates had the highest chance of forging ahead to earn a degree. And a majority of all certificate earners who obtain an associate credential do so within three years, the report said.

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Some of the largest states in the country, including Florida, California and Texas, have the highest number of students using the associate-to-bachelor's pathway. Although the report did not draw any conclusions about this trend, Shapiro said states like Texas and Florida have strong articulation agreements and programs that encourage students to spend a few years in community college before heading to a four-year institution. Florida was also one of five states, including New Jersey, Utah, Washington and Idaho, where more than 47 percent of community college students completed a bachelor's degree after obtaining an associate degree.

Danielle Douglas-Gabriel covers the economics of education, writing about the financial lives of students from when they take out student debt through their experiences in the job market. Before that, she wrote about the banking industry. [🐦 Follow @DaniDougPost](#)

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