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# Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 2003–04

## With a Special Analysis of Community College Students

## Statistical Analysis Report

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National Postsecondary Student Aid Study

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## With a Special Analysis of Community College Students

## Statistical Analysis Report

**June 2006**

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# Executive Summary

This report is the fifth in a series of reports that provide a statistical snapshot of the undergraduate population. The reports accompany the newly released data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and each one includes a focused analysis on a particular topic. This report focuses on community college students, who represent about 4 in 10 undergraduates, or about 7.6 million students nationwide.[1] With their open enrollment policies and relatively low cost, community colleges have long provided access to underserved populations, such as students from low-income families and those who are the first in their family to attend college (Cohen and Brawer 2003). This report focuses on the relationship between a measure of degree commitment and student persistence among community college students.

Student persistence is of concern to educators and policymakers because large numbers of students who begin their college education in community colleges never complete it. For example, among a cohort of first-time freshmen who enrolled in community colleges in 1995–96, some 48 percent had either completed a credential (36 percent) or transferred to a 4-year institution (12 percent) 6 years after first enrolling (Hoachlander, Sikora, and Horn 2003). In contrast, among students who first enrolled in 4-year colleges or universities, 63 percent had completed a bachelor's degree, and another 18 percent were still enrolled or had completed an associate's degree or certificate (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003).

## Data and Methods

This study is based on survey data collected in the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04). NPSAS:04 collected information from a sample of about 80,000 undergraduates (including 25,000 community college students) and 11,000 graduate and first-professional students who were enrolled at any time between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004, in about 1,400 postsecondary institutions. In total, the NPSAS:04 study sample represents about 19 million undergraduates and 3 million graduate and first-professional students. Appendix B provides more information about the sample design.

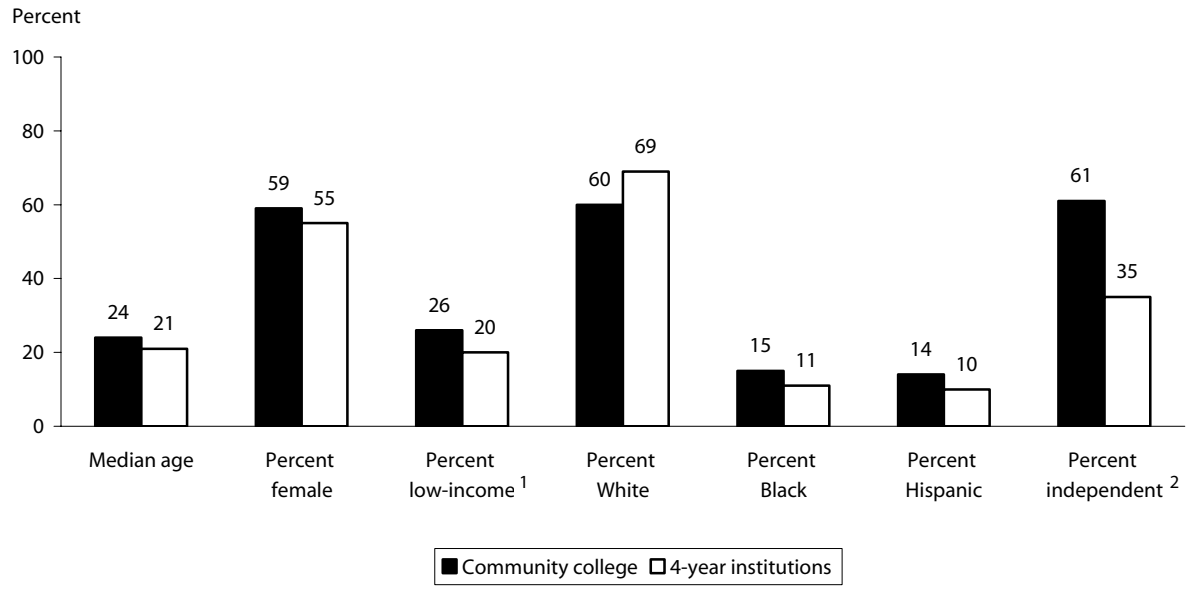
The estimates presented in this report were produced using the NPSAS:04 Undergraduate Data Analysis System (DAS). The analysis uses standard *t* tests to determine the statistical significance of differences between estimates and a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to detect trends across ordered categories (such as income levels). All differences noted are statistically significant at $p < .05$. For more information on statistical methods, see appendix B. Readers should bear in mind that the findings from the study presented here are entirely descriptive in nature. Although associations are noted and discussed, no causal inferences should be made.

[1] Community colleges are public 2-year institutions. See compendium table 1.3 for the distribution of students by type of institution. Weighted total is from the NPSAS:04 Undergraduate Data Analysis System.

## Overview of Community College Students

Compared with students attending 4-year colleges, community college students are more likely to be older, female, Black or Hispanic, and from low-income families (figure A). While the traditional-age student population has been increasing over the last decade (Adelman 2005), community colleges still serve primarily independent students. These are students predominantly age 24 or older who are considered financially independent from their parents for financial aid purposes. However, younger students who are married and/or have children are also considered independent.[2] Some 61 percent of community college students were independent compared with 35 percent of students enrolled in public or private not-for-profit 4-year institutions. One-third of community college students were

**Figure A. Demographic characteristics of undergraduates enrolled in community colleges and 4-year institutions: 2003–04**




[1] Percentage at 125th percentile or below the established poverty level in 2002.

[2] Students who are classified as financially independent from their parents for financial aid purposes (primarily age 24 or older).

NOTE: Four-year institutions include public and private not-for-profit institutions only. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

[2] Younger students who are married or have children make up about 14 percent of all independent students (see compendium table 3.3).

married with children, and one-fourth were single parents (table 2).[3]

When incomes are examined against established poverty thresholds, just over one-fourth (26 percent) of community college students fell into the lowest income group.[4] In comparison, about one-fifth of students in 4-year colleges and universities were in the same low-income group.

### *Attendance and Work*

Community college students often attend college part time and work full time. In 2003–04, more than two-thirds attended classes part time, including 26 percent who attended less than half time (table 5). Nearly all (79 percent) community college students worked while enrolled (averaging 32 hours per week), and 41 percent worked full time (compendium table 5.1).

### *Tuition and Financial Aid*

The public 2-year sector is, in general, the least expensive option for students seeking postsecondary education (College Board 2004). In 2003–04, the average tuition and fees paid by all community college students were about $1,000 (table 3-A). The minority of students who attended full time for the full academic year (22 percent)[5] paid an average of about $2,000, while the remaining students (part-time or part-year) paid about $800.

Just under one-half (47 percent) of community college students received some form of financial aid, primarily grants (40 percent). Because community college students are likely to work full time or attend part time, or both, relatively few take out student loans. In 2003–04, for example, 12 percent had borrowed an average of about $3,600. For those attending full time for a full year, 23 percent had borrowed an average of about $4,100.

## Community College Track

In a recent report, Adelman (2005) used data from the postsecondary transcripts of 1992 high school graduates to develop "portraits" of populations who attend community colleges. These portraits were based on the number of college credits earned by traditional-age students (age 23 or younger) in various degree programs over an 8-year period. The portraits identified groups of students who were likely to persist and complete a degree and those who were not likely. For example, those likely to complete tended to be in collegiate tracks pursuing transfer to a 4-year college to attain bachelor's degrees, and those in occupational programs leading to credentials at the community college. Important factors influencing completion were measures of first-year credit accumulation and continuous college enrollment.

The analysis presented here draws on Adelman's model to illuminate the educational track of all students enrolled in community colleges in 2003–04. While Adelman's model focused on traditional college-age students using 8 years of transcript data, this study encompasses all community college students and is limited to information for 1 academic year.

[3] Single parents are defined as students who have children or dependents and who are unmarried or do not live with a spouse (i.e., divorced or separated).

[4] Defined as incomes at or below the 125th percentile of established poverty levels.

[5] See compendium table 1.5 for the proportion of students attending full time for a full year.

This study developed a taxonomy called the "Community College Track," which classifies students by their relative commitment to completing their respective degree programs. Three levels of commitment were identified: more committed, less committed, and not committed.

## *Defining Degree Commitment*

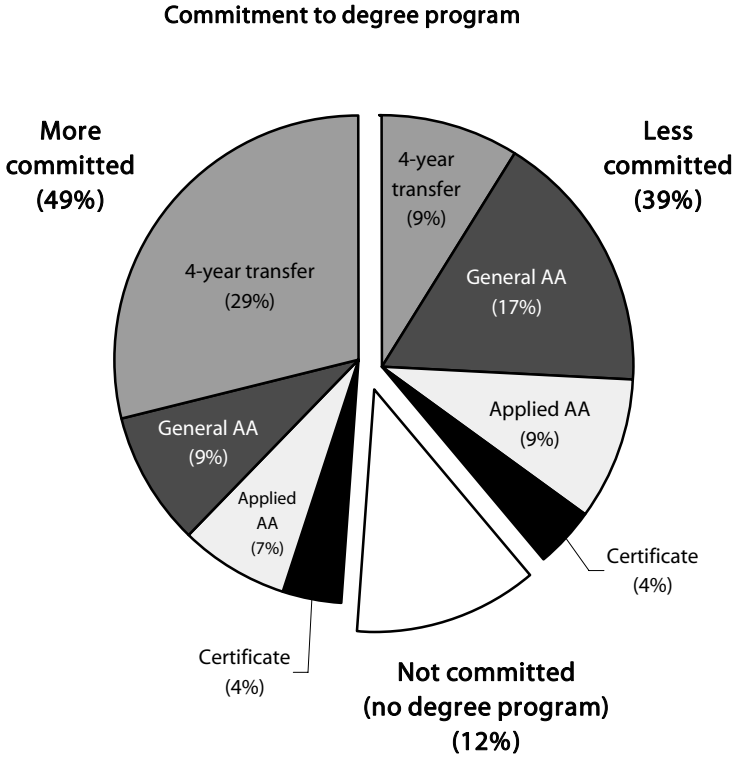
The measure of students' commitment toward completing a program of study is based on two factors known to be associated with degree attainment: college attendance intensity (Carroll 1989; Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003) and intent to transfer to complete a degree (Tinto 1993). Students classified as more committed met a defined threshold for these requirements by attending college at least half time throughout their enrollment for the year under study, and reporting that transferring to a 4-year college (for those in 4-year transfer programs) or obtaining a subbaccalaureate credential (for those in associate's degree or certificate programs) at the community college were reasons for enrolling. Students not meeting these criteria were separated into those enrolled in formal degree programs (less committed) and those who were not seeking a degree (not committed). Degree program information was obtained from student interviews and from the community college. The four programs include 4-year transfer, general associate's degree, applied associate's degree, and vocational certificate. The distinction between general and applied associate's degree programs (AA) is based entirely on student responses to a question asking them if they were pursuing a general associate's degree or an occupational or technical degree (i.e., applied). Students are distributed within the community college track as shown in figure B. Altogether, 49 percent of community college students met the criteria for being classified as more committed, 39 percent were classified as less committed, and 12 percent were not in a formal degree program nor did they express intentions of earning a credential and thus were classified as not committed. Some 29 percent of community college students were classified as more committed in 4-year transfer programs; these students made up the largest community college track, followed by those in the less committed general AA track (17 percent). The two smallest tracks were made up of students in certificate programs, whether they were classified as more or less committed (4 percent in each group).

## *Student Characteristics*

Given the broad spectrum of programs community colleges offer, one would expect the community college track to vary with students' demographic characteristics, especially with age. This was clearly evident as shown in figure C. Traditional college-age students (younger than 24) constituted a majority of those in the more committed tracks (58 percent), including 67 percent of the more committed 4-year transfer students. In contrast, students in their 30s or older made up nearly one-half of those enrolled in the less committed applied AA track (47 percent) and a majority of those in the less committed certificate track; students in their 30s or older also constituted a majority of those who were not enrolled in any degree program, or not committed to a degree program (56 percent).

In addition to age differences, gender and racial/ethnic group differences also were evident. Among the more committed students, women constituted greater proportions of the general and applied AA tracks (64 to 67 percent) than they did of the 4-year track (56 percent) (table 8). Males, on the other hand, made up a greater proportion of

**Figure B. Percentage distribution of community college students, by the community college track: 2003–04**

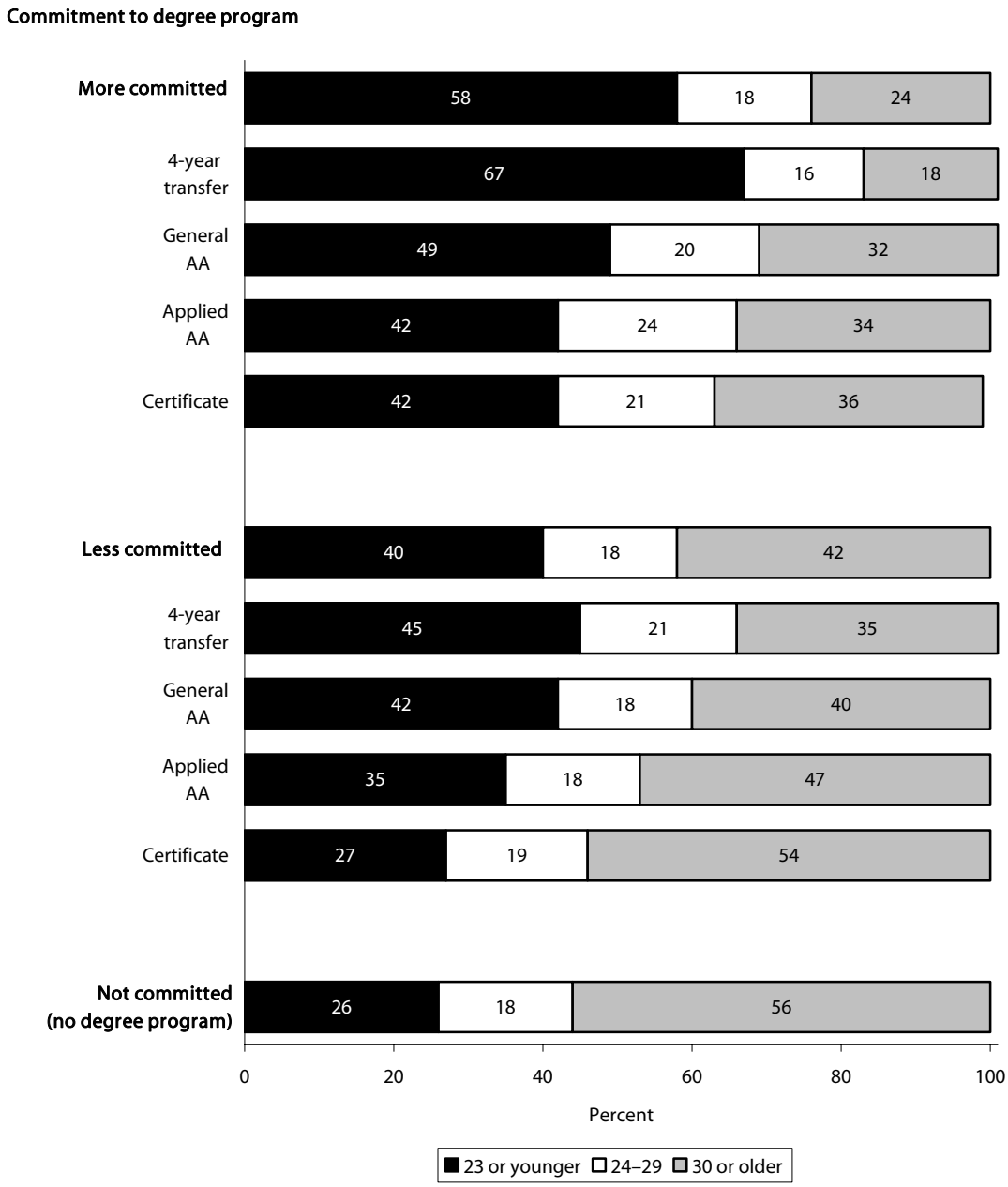



NOTE: The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) as reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied). Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

the more committed 4-year track than they did the more committed applied or general AA tracks. This finding coincides with studies showing that men with bachelor's degree intentions are more likely than women to enroll in community colleges, while women are more likely to enroll in 4-year colleges (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003).

As with gender, racial/ethnic group differences were observed, especially among those in the more committed applied AA track. Compared with their representation among all community college students, White students were overrepresented and Hispanic students were underrepresented in the more committed applied AA track (table 10).

**Figure C. Age distribution of community college students as of 12/31/03, by the community college track**




NOTE: The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) as reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied). Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Specifically, some 60 percent of all community college students were White, compared with 69 percent of the more committed applied AA students. Conversely, 14 percent of all community college students were Hispanic, compared with 9 percent of those in the more committed applied AA track.

All the occupational tracks (i.e., applied AA and certificate regardless of commitment) were made up of higher proportions of Black than Hispanic students. For example, Black students constituted 17 percent of the more committed applied AA track, while Hispanic students constituted 9 percent. Conversely, the nondegree track was made up of a higher proportion of Hispanic than Black students (17 vs. 9 percent). In other words, the data suggest that Black students enroll in occupational programs more often than Hispanic students, while Hispanic students are more likely than their Black peers to attend classes that do not necessarily lead to a credential. It may be that some Hispanic students are taking courses to strengthen their English language skills, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. No differences, on the other hand, were detected in the proportions of Black and Hispanic students in either of the 4-year transfer tracks.

## *Reasons for Enrolling in a Community College*

Students meeting the more committed criteria were required to report that transferring to a 4-year institution (for those in the 4-year transfer track) or obtaining a credential at the community college (for those in the associate's degree and certificate tracks) were reasons for enrolling (table 6). In addition to these reasons, students could report a number of others. For example, 46 percent of all community college students reported personal interest as a reason for enrolling and 42 percent reported obtaining job skills as a reason.

Students in less committed or not committed tracks cited personal interest or obtaining job skills as reasons for enrolling more often than they did transfer or completing a credential. For example, about 16 percent of the less committed general or applied AA students said completing an associate's degree was a reason for enrolling. In contrast, more than one-half of the less committed AA students (60 and 57 percent, respectively) reported enrolling for personal interest. Moreover, even though these students were enrolled in formal degree programs, they were less likely than those in nondegree programs to report that completing an AA was a reason for enrolling. This finding raises the question of why they were enrolled in formal degree programs. Other studies based on a longitudinal survey of first-time freshmen in 1995–96 indicated that when students were asked specifically about what degree they expected to obtain at the community college, most (85 percent) reported that they expected to complete a subbaccalaureate credential or to transfer to a 4-year institution (Hoachlander, Sikora, and Horn 2003). These findings correspond to the current study in which most students were enrolled in degree programs (88 percent). Yet this study also shows that when community college students were given the opportunity to report multiple reasons for enrolling, a relatively large proportion did not express an interest in completing a degree or transferring to a 4-year college.

## *Continuity of Enrollment*

Students who had obtained or expected to obtain a credential in 2003–04 or those who were enrolled for 9 months or more were considered to have exhibited strong enrollment continuity for 1

year.[6] It is evident from the results that students classified as more committed maintained strong enrollment continuity more often than all other students (figure D). Overall, 83 percent of the more committed students did so, compared with 70 percent of students classified as less committed and 58 percent of those in the nondegree track. Furthermore, within each individual track, the likelihood of maintaining strong enrollment continuity for 1 year was higher for students identified as more committed than for those identified as less committed. For example, 83 percent of more committed 4-year transfer students maintained strong enrollment continuity, compared with 58 percent of their less committed 4-year transfer track counterparts.

## Summary and Conclusions

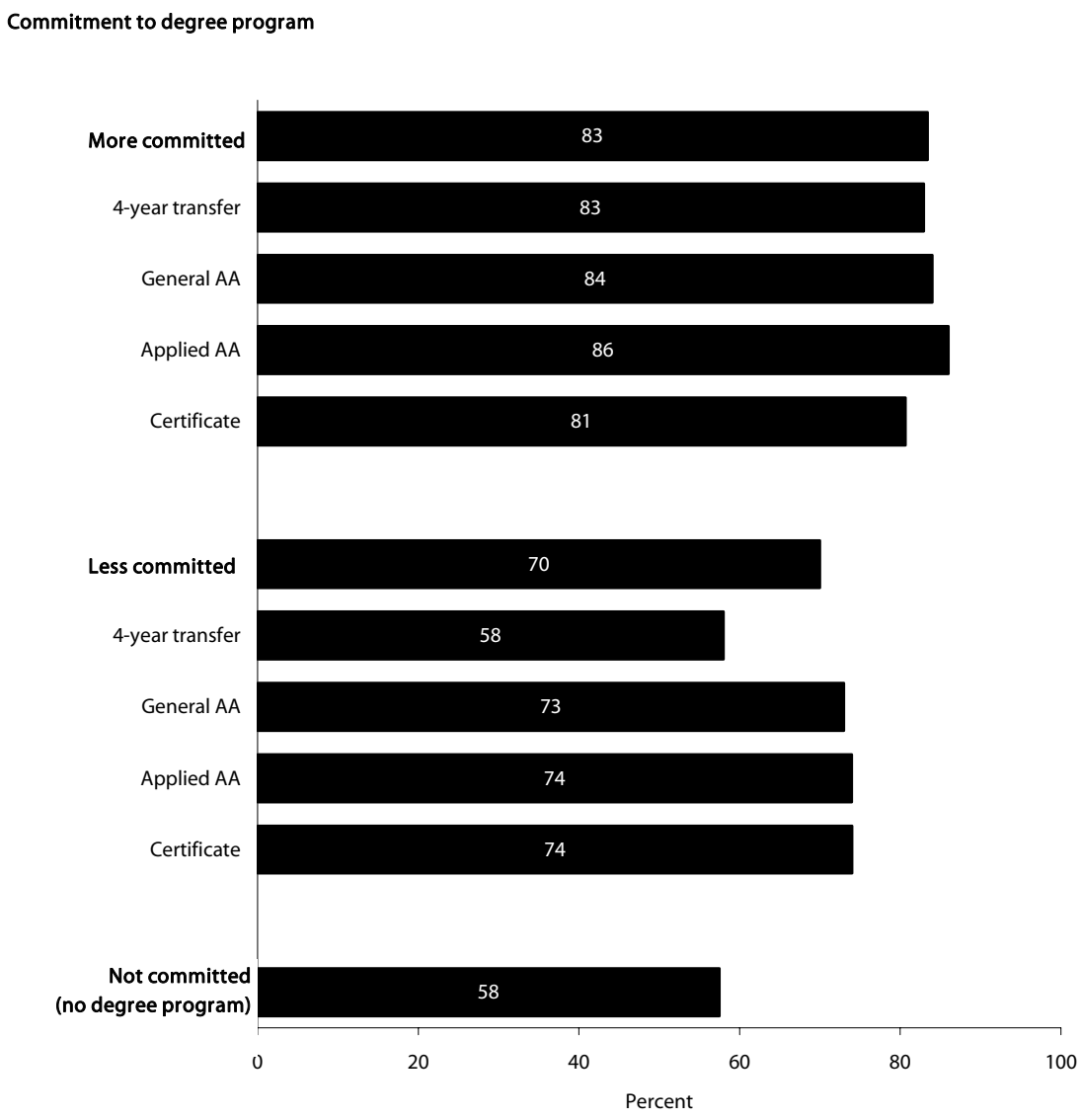
The community college track developed for this study appeared to differentiate among the diverse groups of students who attend community colleges. The results suggest that community colleges are successful in retaining students for 1 year who demonstrate a relatively strong commitment to completing a program of study. Indeed, 83 percent of students classified as more committed maintained strong enrollment continuity over the 1-year period of study. Yet students meeting the criteria for strong commitment (i.e., those classified as more committed) made up 49 percent of those enrolled in community colleges and they tended to be younger more traditional students. Among the remaining students (whether less committed or not committed), at least two-thirds of those enrolled in a formal degree program did not report that completing a degree was a reason for attending. It is possible that these students understand the importance of going to college, but either do not have the academic preparation necessary to complete a credential or do not yet know what they want to accomplish in college. Alternatively, these students also may be enrolled in degree programs for financial aid reasons or in order to gain access to the courses they are interested in whether they are for job skills or personal enrichment.

Students in degree programs without intentions to complete a credential may be analogous to what Adelman (2005) terms "visitors" to the community college: those who attend for relatively short periods of time, earning fewer than 30 credits at the community college. Among the high school cohort Adelman analyzed, 46 percent were classified as visitors. In this analysis, 39 percent of all community college students did not meet the criteria for being classified as more committed to completing a program of study.

The findings from this study help explain why community college students complete associate's degrees and occupational credentials at relatively low rates. It appears that a substantial proportion of students who enroll in formal degree programs do not necessarily want to complete a credential. Rather, greater proportions cited personal interest or obtaining job skills as reasons for enrolling. The results suggest that if community college graduation rates were based on students expressing a clear intention of transfer or degree completion rather than on simply being enrolled in a formal degree program, they would be considerably higher.

[6] This analysis is limited to students enrolled in the fall so that all had the same opportunity to be enrolled for at least 9 months. It should also be noted that a small percentage of students who did not meet the criteria for 1-year enrollment continuity may have transferred to another institution mid-year, but this information is not captured in the survey.

**Figure D. Percentage of community college students who completed a credential or stayed enrolled for 9 or more months among those enrolled in the fall, by the community college track: 2003–04**




NOTE: The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) as reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied). Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

# Foreword

This report is the fifth in a series of reports that accompany the release of the data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). These "undergraduate profile" reports present a statistical snapshot of the undergraduate population surveyed. This report includes an analysis of community college students, examining the relationship between a measure of students' degree commitment and their likelihood of exhibiting strong enrollment continuity over the 1-year period under study.

The report is based on data from the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04). NPSAS has been conducted about every 4 years since 1987. Each NPSAS is a comprehensive nationwide study to determine how students and their families pay for postsecondary education.

The estimates presented in the report were produced using the NCES Data Analysis System (DAS), a web-based software application that enables users to specify and generate tables for most of the postsecondary surveys conducted by NCES. The DAS produces the design-adjusted standard errors necessary for testing the statistical significance of differences in the estimates. The DAS for NPSAS:04 is available on the NCES website (http://nces.ed.gov/das). For more information on the DAS, see appendix B of this report.

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

The postsecondary education system in the United States serves a broad array of individuals, from traditional students who graduate from high school and immediately enroll in college full time, to working adults taking one course at a time, to those who need intensive short-term occupational training to enter the labor market. In 2003–04, some 19 million undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education over the course of the year.[1]

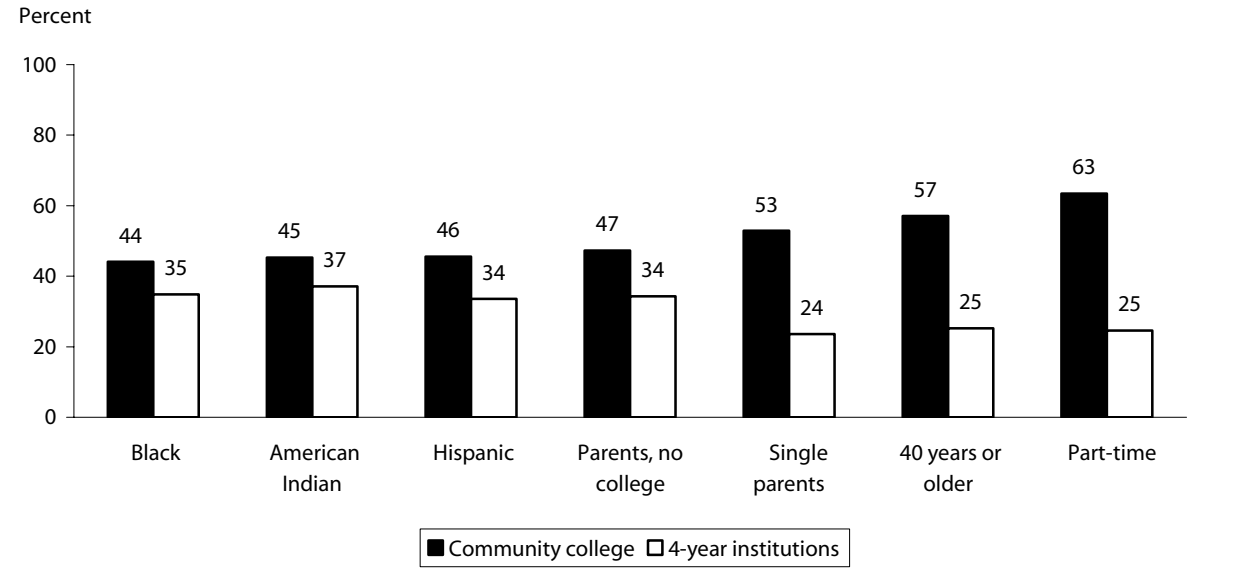
This report, the fifth in a series of reports that accompany the release of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), provides a statistical snapshot of this undergraduate population. The NPSAS reports typically provide a compendium of tables describing the entire undergraduate population and a special analysis focusing on a particular topic. Previous topics include the diversity in the undergraduate population (Horn, Peter, and Rooney 2002), the extent to which undergraduates work (Horn and Berktold 1998), and undergraduates at risk of not completing postsecondary education (Horn and Premo 1996). In this report, the analysis focuses on community college students.

In the 2003–04 academic year, about 4 in 10 undergraduates, or 7.6 million students, were enrolled in public 2-year institutions, also known as community colleges (compendium table 1.3).[2] With their open enrollment policies and relatively low cost, community colleges have long provided access to underserved populations who might otherwise not have attended college (Cohen and Brawer 2003). In 2003–04, for example, community colleges enrolled 44 percent of Black undergraduates, 45 percent of American Indian undergraduates, 46 percent of Hispanic undergraduates, 47 percent of students whose parents had never attended college, 53 percent of single parents, 57 percent of undergraduates 40 years or older, and 63 percent of students who attended college exclusively part time (figure 1). Community colleges also provide opportunities to students who may have a poor academic record in high school, who need English or other basic skills to undertake college-level work, and who need job skills, as well as to those who are simply unsure about what they want to do after high school (Grubb 1999).

[1] Total enrollment number is from the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04), which includes students enrolled at any time over a 12-month period. Therefore, it is larger than the total number reported from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (15 million undergraduates), which is based only on fall 2003 enrollment.

[2] Weighted total number from NPSAS:04 Undergraduate Data Analysis System (DAS).

**Figure 1. Percentage of undergraduates attending community colleges and 4-year institutions, by selected student characteristics: 2003–04**



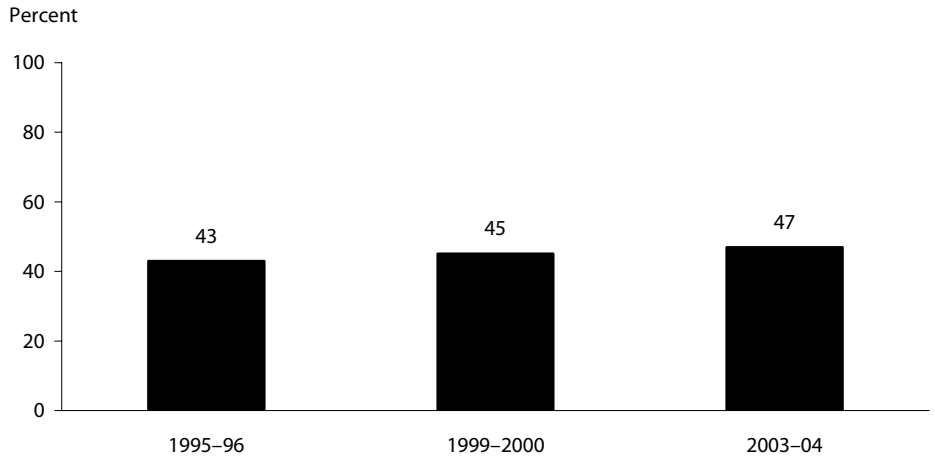

NOTE: Four-year institutions include public and private not-for-profit institutions only. Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and American Indian includes Alaska Native. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

During the 1980s, when the population of traditional college-age (18–24) students was declining, community colleges expanded their programs to attract older students and working adults (Cohen and Brawer 2003). These students enrolled primarily to enhance their job skills or to take courses for their own personal enrichment. The expansion of these programs resulted in the aging of the community college population and the majority of these students attended part time.

However, renewed growth in the population of traditional college-age students—children of the post-World War II baby boom generation—began in the early 1990s and is projected to grow 17 percent by 2012 (Gerald and Hussar 2002). This enrollment growth has coincided with a substantial increase in 4-year college tuition over the last decade (College Board 2004). Correspondingly, community colleges are enrolling higher proportions of traditional-age students. For example, in 1991, about one-third, or 32 percent, of students who enrolled for credit in community colleges were younger than age 22, while 10 years later, the proportion had increased to 42 percent (Adelman 2005). Similarly, figure 2 displays the proportions of all

community college students younger than age 24 who were enrolled in 1995–96, 1999–2000, and 2003–04. During these years, the proportion rose from 43 to 47 percent.

**Figure 2. Percentage of community college students younger than age 24: 1995–96, 1999–2000, 2003–04**




NOTE: Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995–96, 1999–2000, and 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies (NPSAS:96, NPSAS:2000, and NPSAS:04).

At the same time, community colleges have experienced increased demands for short-term occupational training programs to help meet the labor market's need for skilled labor. Recently, for example, the U.S. Senate sponsored a bill containing a provision to authorize grants to 2-year colleges to "work with businesses and local labor boards to provide job training in high-growth, high-skill fields suffering shortages of workers" (Field 2005).

In light of this pressure on community colleges, from both the traditional college-age population and adults needing occupational training, the 2003–04 undergraduate descriptive report provides a special analysis of community college students, focusing on the relationship between a measure of degree commitment and student persistence using a measure of enrollment continuity over 1 year. Student persistence—that is, students' likelihood of remaining enrolled until they obtain a degree or other credential—is of concern to educators and policymakers because large numbers of students who begin their college careers in community colleges never complete them. For example, among a cohort of first-time freshmen who enrolled in community colleges in 1995–96, some 48 percent had either completed a credential or transferred to a 4-year institution (36 and 12 percent, respectively) 6 years after enrolling (e.g., Hoachlander, Sikora,

and Horn 2003). In contrast, among students who first enrolled in 4-year colleges or universities, 63 percent had completed a bachelor's degree, and another 18 percent were still enrolled or had completed an associate's degree or certificate over the same time period (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003).

This report consists of two main sections, a narrative describing the community college analysis followed by a compendium of tables providing extensive information on all undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education in the academic year 2003–04. These tables show, for example, that some 58 percent of all undergraduates were women, and less than two-thirds (63 percent) were White (compendium tables 3.1 and 3.2). The median age of undergraduates was 22 (compendium table 3.3), and relatively large proportions of students combined college attendance with family and work responsibilities. For instance, nearly 30 percent of undergraduates had children, and 13 percent were single parents (compendium table 3.7). Roughly three-fourths of all undergraduates worked while enrolled, averaging 29 hours per week, and one-third worked full time (compendium table 5.1). About two-thirds of the parents of undergraduates had attended college, including about 40 percent whose parents held bachelor's or more advanced degrees (compendium table 3.11). The remaining one-third were students who were the first in their families to attend college.

Business and health-related fields were the most popular fields of study among undergraduates, with 20 and 16 percent, respectively, majoring in these fields. In contrast, less than 1 percent of undergraduates majored either in physical sciences or mathematics (compendium table 2.2).

The compendium of tables contains all this and other information, including the following:

- the types of institutions in which students were enrolled;
- full-time and part-time attendance rates;
- degree programs, fields of study, and grade point averages (GPAs);
- student demographic characteristics;
- financial aid awards;
- dependent students' levels of credit card debt;
- patterns of work, community service, and voting;
- students with disabilities; and
- students who reported taking remedial education courses.

The list of tables preceding the introduction of this report provides a convenient way to navigate the compendium of tables. Immediately following the compendium of tables, appendix A provides a glossary of all the variables included in the tables and appendix B provides a detailed description of the NPSAS:04 survey and methods used in the analysis.

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# Data and Methods

This study is based on data collected in the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04). NPSAS:04 collected information from a sample of about 80,000 undergraduates (including 25,000 community college students) and 11,000 graduate and first-professional students who were enrolled at any time between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004, in about 1,400 postsecondary institutions. The sample includes institutions in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico that were eligible to participate in the federal financial aid programs in Title IV of the Higher Education Act.

The NPSAS:04 study sample represents about 19 million undergraduates. Because the survey includes students enrolled at any time over a 12-month period, it includes more students than were enrolled only in the 2003 fall term. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) indicate that about 15 million undergraduates were enrolled in the fall of 2003. In the compendium tables, which include all undergraduates, total rows are presented for all students and also for students only in the 50 states. In the community college tables, too few students were sampled from community colleges outside the 50 states to show a separate total row without students from Puerto Rico.[3]

The institution sampling frame for NPSAS:04 was constructed from the 2000–01 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics (IC) files. The institutions on the sampling frame were partitioned into 58 institutional strata based on institutional control, highest level of offering, and Carnegie classification. NPSAS:04 also includes state-representative undergraduate student samples for three types of institutions (public 4-year, public 2-year, and private not-for-profit 4-year) in 12 states.[4] Appendix B provides a more detailed description of the sample design. The weighted student interview response rate for NPSAS:04 was 91 percent, and the weighted overall response rate was 73 percent (taking into account an institution response rate of 80 percent). The weighted student response rate for public 2-year institutions (community colleges) was 84 percent.

The student weighting adjustments eliminated some, but not all, bias for students in public 2-year institutions. Significant bias was reduced from 35 to 29 percent for the variables known

[3] Fewer than 30 community college students from outside the 50 states were sampled from community colleges.

[4] These 12 states were selected by NCES from those expressing interest. The 12 states were categorized into three groups based on population size: small states (Connecticut, Delaware, Nebraska, Oregon), medium-size states (Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, Tennessee), and large states (California, Illinois, New York, Texas).

for most respondents and nonrespondents, which are considered to be some of the more analytically important variables and are correlated with many of the other variables. All significant bias was eliminated for the non-aid variables (i.e., region, institution total enrollment, percentage part-time fall enrollment, and in-state tuition). See appendix B for a detailed description of the nonresponse bias analysis.

The estimates presented in this report were produced using the NPSAS:04 Undergraduate Data Analysis System (DAS). The DAS contains hundreds of variables in a software application that enables users to generate their own tables. The DAS also contains a detailed description of how each variable was created and includes question wording for items coming directly from an interview. Appendix A contains a glossary of all the variables used in this report.

Two variables were constructed specifically for the community college student analysis: one classifies community college students according to their relative commitment to a degree program, and the second is a measure of 1-year enrollment continuity. These variables are described in detail later in the report. By using these variables, the study attempts to provide a longitudinal glimpse into the progress of community college students on the various degree tracks, but it is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the NPSAS:04 data. However, a survey of the longitudinal cohort of first-time college freshmen (Beginning Postsecondary Students) among students who participated in NPSAS:04 is in progress. In the coming years, this survey will provide educational histories for a relatively large sample of beginning community college students and will be a rich source of data documenting their experiences.

The analyses described in this report use standard *t* tests to determine the statistical significance of differences between estimates and a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to detect trends across ordered categories. All differences noted are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. For more information on statistical methods, see appendix B. The analysis presented here is entirely descriptive in nature. Although associations are noted and discussed, no causal inferences should be made.

## Who Enrolls in Community Colleges?

Compared with students attending 4-year colleges and universities, community college students are more likely to be older, female, and from low-income families and are less likely to be White. These and other findings are described in this section, which examines the demographic characteristics of community college students in 2003–04.

The age, gender, and racial/ethnic distributions of undergraduates are shown in table 1. Nearly half (47 percent) of community college students were younger than 24 years. Students in their late 20s made up 18 percent, while those 30 or older constituted 35 percent of community college students. The proportions of students in the older age groups were larger than those in the 4-year sector. The median ages of community college students and students in 4-year colleges were 24 and 21, respectively.[5]

For the past two decades, women have made up the majority of undergraduates (Peter and Horn 2005). In 2003–04, some 59 percent of community college students were women, compared with 55 percent enrolled in the 4-year sector. White students also made up the majority of 2003–04 community college students (60 percent), though the proportion was smaller than that in 4-year colleges (69 percent). Some 15 percent of community college students were Black and 14 percent were Hispanic, compared with 11 and 10 percent, respectively, for those in 4-year institutions.

Despite rising numbers of traditional-age students, community colleges still mainly serve independent students (Phillippe and Patton 1999). Independent students are age 24 or older and are considered financially independent of their parents for financial aid purposes. Younger students who are married, have children, or both are also considered independent. Some 61 percent of community college students were independent in various family configurations, compared with 35 percent of 4-year college students (table 2). Roughly one-third of independent community college students were married parents, and one-fourth were single parents.[6]

[5] See compendium table 3.3 for median ages.

[6] Single parents are defined as students who have children and who are unmarried or do not live with a spouse (i.e., divorced or separated).

**Table 1. Percentage distribution of undergraduates' age group, gender, and race/ethnicity for students attending community colleges and 4-year institutions: 2003–04**

| Student characteristics | Community colleges | 4-year institutions[1] |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Age as of 12/31/03 | | |
| 23 years or younger | 47.0 | 69.7 |
| 24–29 years | 18.2 | 14.5 |
| 30 years or older | 34.8 | 15.8 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 40.9 | 45.1 |
| Female | 59.1 | 54.9 |
| Race/ethnicity[2] | | |
| White | 59.9 | 69.3 |
| Black | 15.3 | 11.2 |
| Hispanic | 14.4 | 9.8 |
| Asian | 5.3 | 5.3 |
| American Indian | 1.0 | 0.8 |
| Pacific Islander | 0.7 | 0.4 |
| Multiple races | 2.1 | 2.0 |
| Other | 1.3 | 1.2 |

[1] Public and private not-for-profit institutions only.

[2] Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, American Indian includes Alaska Native, Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian, and Other includes respondents having origins in a race not listed. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Income levels of dependent community college students differed somewhat from their counterparts in the 4-year sector. For example, 29 percent of dependent community college students came from families with incomes under $32,000, compared with about 21 percent of dependent students enrolled in 4-year institutions. At the other end of the income spectrum, 19 percent of dependent community college students came from families with incomes of $92,000 or more, compared with 29 percent of their counterparts enrolled in 4-year colleges. The same pattern was not evident among independent students. In fact, community college students were somewhat less likely than their 4-year counterparts to be in the lower income bracket (46 percent vs. 52 percent had incomes of $25,000 or less). However, independent community college students were somewhat more likely to be working full time than their independent counterparts in 4-year colleges and therefore likely to show higher earnings.[7]

[7] About 50 percent of independent community college students worked full time, compared with 46 percent of independent 4-year college students (NPSAS:04 Data Analysis System).

**Table 2. Percentage distribution of undergraduates' dependency and family status and income level for students attending community colleges and 4-year institutions: 2003–04**

| Student characteristics | Community colleges | 4-year institutions[1] |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Dependency and family status | | |
| Dependent | 38.8 | 64.6 |
| Independent | 61.2 | 35.4 |
| No dependents, unmarried | 26.5 | 36.9 |
| Married, no dependents | 15.8 | 17.7 |
| Single parent | 25.1 | 18.0 |
| Married parents | 32.6 | 27.4 |
| Dependent income | | |
| Less than $32,000 | 28.6 | 21.0 |
| $32,000–92,000 | 52.1 | 50.5 |
| $92,000 or more | 19.3 | 28.5 |
| Independent income | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 46.1 | 51.5 |
| $25,000 or more | 53.9 | 48.5 |
| Income percent of poverty level in 2002 | | |
| 125th percentile or lower | 26.4 | 20.3 |

[1] Public and private not-for-profit institutions only.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

When incomes for community college students are compared with established poverty thresholds in 2002, just over one-fourth (26 percent) of the incomes of all community college students fell in the lowest income level (table 2).[8] In comparison, one-fifth of students in 4-year colleges and universities were in the same low-income group.

[8] Established poverty levels are based on family income and family size. The value refers to income as a percentage of the poverty level threshold. A value of 100 indicates the family's income is at or below the poverty level. The low-income group is defined as families with poverty values of 125 or below. The maximum value is 1,000, ten times the poverty level or higher.

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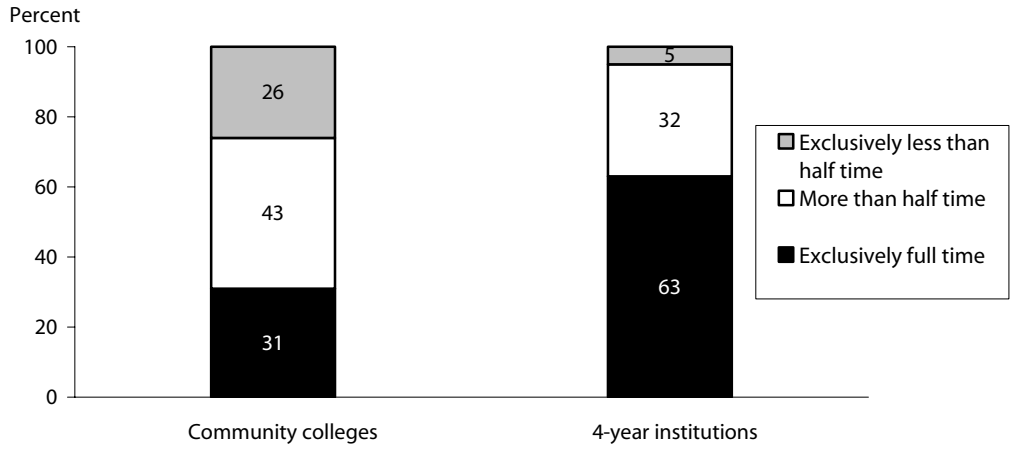
# Attendance, Work, and Paying for College

Attending college part time and working full time are common practices among community college students. In 2003–04, a majority attended classes part time, including 26 percent who attended less than half time (figure 3-A). In contrast, 63 percent of 4-year college students attended exclusively full time, compared with 31 percent of community college students.

**Figure 3-A. Percentage distribution of undergraduates' attendance pattern in community colleges and 4-year institutions: 2003–04**

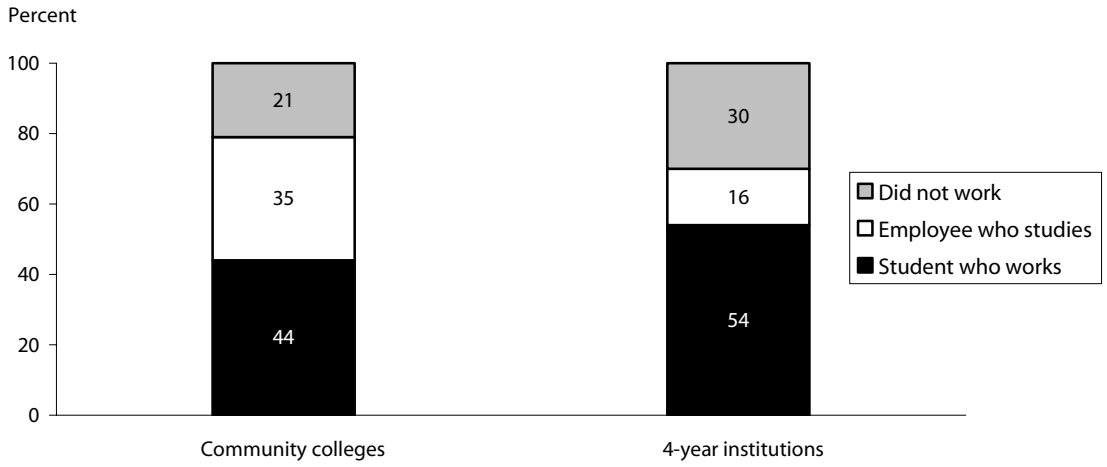



NOTE: Four-year institutions include public and private not-for-profit institutions only. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

About one-fifth (21 percent) of community college students did not work while enrolled, compared with nearly one-third (30 percent) of 4-year college students (figure 3-B). Among those who worked, community college students averaged 32 hours per week and 41 percent worked full time (compendium table 5.1). In contrast, 4-year college students averaged 26 hours per week and 23 percent worked full time while enrolled.

Just how much community college students work is reflected in their likelihood to view themselves primarily as employees rather than students (figure 3-B). Among students who

**Figure 3-B. Percentage distribution of undergraduates' perceived primary role with regard to work and school for students attending community colleges and 4-year institutions: 2003–04**




NOTE: Four-year institutions include public and private not-for-profit institutions only. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

worked while enrolled, roughly one-third (35 percent) identified themselves as employees who also attended classes, while 16 percent of 4-year college students reported the same. In contrast, a majority of 4-year college students (54 percent) identified themselves as students who worked to help pay for their schooling, compared with 44 percent of community college students.

## Tuition and Financial Aid

The public 2-year sector is, in general, the least expensive option for students seeking postsecondary education (College Board 2004). In 2003–04, for example, the average tuition and fees paid nationwide by all community college students was about $1,000 (table 3-A). The minority of students who attended full time for the full academic year (22 percent)[9] paid an average of about $2,000, while the remaining students paid about $800.

Just under one-half (47 percent) of community college students received some form of financial aid, primarily grants (40 percent). Because community college students are likely to work full time or attend part time, or both, relatively few take out student loans. In 2003–04, for

[9] See compendium table 1.5-B for the proportion of students attending full time for a full year.

**Table 3-A. Average tuition and fees, average total price of attendance, and percentage of undergraduates in community colleges receiving any aid, any grants, or any student loans, and among recipients, the average amounts received, by selected student characteristics: 2003–04**

| Student characteristics | Average tuition and fees | Average total price of attendance | Total aid | | Total grants | | Student loans | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount |
| Total | $1,047 | $6,100 | 46.8 | $3,200 | 39.8 | $2,200 | 12.1 | $3,600 |
| Attendance pattern | | | | | | | | |
| Full-time/full-year | 2,039 | 10,500 | 61.3 | 4,900 | 52.7 | 3,400 | 22.8 | 4,100 |
| Part-time or part-year | 762 | 4,900 | 42.7 | 2,400 | 36.1 | 1,700 | 9.0 | 3,300 |
| Dependency status | | | | | | | | |
| Dependent | 1,311 | 6,700 | 42.7 | 3,200 | 35.4 | 2,400 | 12.3 | 2,900 |
| Independent | 880 | 5,800 | 49.5 | 3,200 | 42.7 | 2,000 | 11.9 | 4,200 |
| Dependent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $32,000 | 1,220 | 6,600 | 63.7 | 3,600 | 60.0 | 3,000 | 11.9 | 2,600 |
| $32,000–92,000 | 1,354 | 6,800 | 38.6 | 2,800 | 29.5 | 1,900 | 14.4 | 2,800 |
| More than $92,000 | 1,333 | 6,600 | 22.4 | 2,800 | 14.5 | 1,700 | 7.4 | 3,600 |
| Independent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 975 | 6,300 | 60.3 | 3,700 | 54.5 | 2,400 | 15.5 | 4,100 |
| $25,000 or more | 799 | 5,400 | 40.2 | 2,500 | 32.6 | 1,400 | 8.9 | 4,200 |

NOTE: The total price of attendance includes tuition and fees, room and board, and other expenses as estimated by the institutions. "Total aid" includes all types of financial aid from any source except parents, friends, or relatives but does not include federal tax credits for education (Hope and Lifetime Learning). "Total grants" include grants, scholarships, or tuition waivers from federal, state, institutional, or private sources, including employers. "Student loans" may be from any source, but exclude other forms of financing such as credit cards, home equity loans, loans from individuals, and federal Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS). Federal PLUS loans and other types of aid such as veterans' benefits and job training funds are included in total aid. Students may receive more than one type of aid. Full-time/full-year students were enrolled full time for 9 or more months from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004. Independent students are age 24 or older and students younger than age 24 who are married, have dependents, are veterans, or are orphans or wards of the courts. Other undergraduates younger than age 24 are considered to be dependent. For dependent students, income is the income of their parents. Independent student income includes the income of a spouse if the student is married. Income is total income in 2002. Prior year (2002) income is used in federal need analysis. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: Berkner, L., Wei, C.C., He, S., Lew, S., Cominole, M., and Siegel, P. (2005). *2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04): Undergraduate Financial Aid Estimates for 2003–04 by Type of Institution* (NCES 2005-163), table 13. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

example, 12 percent had borrowed an average of about $3,600. For those attending full time for a full year, however, 23 percent had borrowed an average of about $4,100, while 9 percent of all others borrowed an average of about $3,300.

Low-income students, both dependent and independent, were the most likely to receive financial aid, and for those attending full time for a full year, nearly 80 percent of low-income students received aid (table 3-B). Among aid recipients, dependent low-income students received an average of about $4,800, and their independent counterparts received an average of about $6,300.

**Table 3-B. Average tuition and fees, average total price of attendance, and percentage of full-time, full-year undergraduates in community colleges receiving any aid, any grants, or any student loans, and among recipients, the average amounts received, by selected student characteristics: 2003–04**

| Student characteristics | Average tuition and fees | Average total price of attendance | Total aid | | Total grants | | Student loans | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount |
| **Full-time/full-year** | | | | | | | | |
| Total | $2,039 | $10,500 | 61.3 | $4,900 | 52.7 | $3,400 | 22.8 | $4,100 |
| Dependency status | | | | | | | | |
| Dependent | 2,063 | 10,000 | 54.6 | 4,100 | 45.8 | 3,100 | 18.5 | 3,200 |
| Independent | 2,000 | 11,400 | 72.7 | 6,000 | 64.4 | 3,700 | 30.0 | 4,900 |
| Dependent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $32,000 | 1,879 | 9,600 | 77.1 | 4,800 | 73.3 | 4,000 | 17.8 | 2,800 |
| $32,000–92,000 | 2,106 | 10,000 | 50.0 | 3,600 | 40.3 | 2,300 | 20.5 | 3,200 |
| More than $92,000 | 2,214 | 10,200 | 34.3 | 3,900 | 20.6 | 2,400 | 14.0 | 4,300 |
| Independent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 1,961 | 11,300 | 78.9 | 6,300 | 72.7 | 4,100 | 32.3 | 4,800 |
| $25,000 or more | 2,073 | 11,500 | 61.0 | 5,200 | 48.7 | 2,700 | 25.8 | 5,200 |

NOTE: The total price of attendance includes tuition and fees, room and board, and other expenses as estimated by the institutions. "Total aid" includes all types of financial aid from any source except parents, friends, or relatives but does not include federal tax credits for education (Hope and Lifetime Learning). "Total grants" include grants, scholarships, or tuition waivers from federal, state, institutional, or private sources, including employers. "Student loans" may be from any source, but exclude other forms of financing such as credit cards, home equity loans, loans from individuals, and federal Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS). Federal PLUS loans and other types of aid such as veterans' benefits and job training funds are included in total aid. Students may receive more than one type of aid. Full-time/full-year students were enrolled full time for 9 or more months from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004. Independent students are age 24 or older and students younger than age 24 who are married, have dependents, are veterans, or are orphans or wards of the courts. Other undergraduates younger than age 24 are considered to be dependent. For dependent students, income is the income of their parents. Independent student income includes the income of a spouse if the student is married. Income is total income in 2002. Prior year (2002) income is used in federal need analysis. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: Berkner, L., Wei, C.C., He, S., Lew, S., Cominole, M., and Siegel, P. (2005). *2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04): Undergraduate Financial Aid Estimates for 2003–04 by Type of Institution* (NCES 2005-163), table 13. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Federal grants (primarily Pell Grants) are awarded to the neediest students. Among community college students, about 23 percent had received federal grants, including 35 percent of those attending full time for a full year (tables 4-A and 4-B). One-half of low-income dependent students received federal grants, as did 41 percent of low-income independent students. Dependent low-income federal aid recipients received an average of $2,700 in federal grants, and independent students received about $2,400.

**Table 4-A. Percentage of community college students receiving federal, state, institutional, or other sources of grants, and among recipients, average grant amounts received, by selected student characteristics: 2003–04**

| | Federal grants | | State grants | | Institutional grants | | Other grants | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student characteristics | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount |
| Total | 23.1 | $2,300 | 11.3 | $1,000 | 7.5 | $1,200 | 11.8 | $1,100 |
| Attendance pattern | | | | | | | | |
| Full-time/full-year | 35.4 | 3,200 | 19.3 | 1,300 | 14.2 | 1,700 | 10.3 | 1,500 |
| Part-time or part-year | 19.6 | 1,800 | 9.0 | 800 | 5.6 | 800 | 12.2 | 1,000 |
| Dependency status | | | | | | | | |
| Dependent | 19.7 | 2,300 | 12.3 | 1,100 | 9.6 | 1,600 | 8.4 | 1,300 |
| Independent | 25.3 | 2,200 | 10.6 | 900 | 6.2 | 800 | 13.9 | 1,100 |
| Dependent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $32,000 | 49.5 | 2,700 | 20.0 | 1,200 | 13.8 | 1,200 | 7.1 | 1,300 |
| $32,000–92,000 | 10.4 | 1,500 | 10.8 | 1,000 | 9.3 | 1,800 | 9.8 | 1,200 |
| More than $92,000 | 0.4 | ‡ | 5.1 | 1,100 | 4.1 | 2,100 | 6.6 | 1,500 |
| Independent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 41.2 | 2,400 | 15.0 | 1,000 | 8.7 | 700 | 10.1 | 1,200 |
| $25,000 or more | 11.7 | 1,600 | 6.9 | 900 | 4.1 | 900 | 17.2 | 1,000 |

‡ Reporting standards not met.

NOTE: Federal grants are Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG), and a small percentage of grants and scholarships from other federal programs. State and institutional grants include any grants, scholarships, or tuition waivers that are funded by a state or by the institution attended, respectively. Other grants include grants and scholarships from private sources outside of the institution, including tuition aid from employers. Students may receive grants from more than one source. Full-time/full-year students were enrolled full time for 9 or more months from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004. Independent students are age 24 or older and students younger than age 24 who are married, have dependents, are veterans, or are orphans or wards of the courts. Other undergraduates younger than age 24 are considered to be dependent. For dependent students, income is the income of their parents. Independent student income includes the income of a spouse if the student is married. Income is total income in 2002. Prior year (2002) income is used in federal need analysis. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: Berkner, L., Wei, C.C., He, S., Lew, S., Cominole, M., and Siegel, P. (2005). *2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04): Undergraduate Financial Aid Estimates for 2003–04 by Type of Institution* (NCES 2005-163), table 14. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

**Table 4-B. Percentage of full-time, full-year community college students receiving federal, state, institutional, or other sources of grants, and among recipients, average grant amounts received, by selected student characteristics: 2003–04**

| Student characteristics | Federal grants | | State grants | | Institutional grants | | Other grants | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount | Percent | Average amount |
| **Full-time/full-year** | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 35.4 | $3,200 | 19.3 | $1,300 | 14.2 | $1,700 | 10.3 | $1,500 |
| Dependency status | | | | | | | | |
| Dependent | 25.2 | 2,900 | 17.9 | 1,300 | 15.6 | 2,000 | 10.4 | 1,400 |
| Independent | 52.6 | 3,400 | 21.6 | 1,300 | 11.9 | 1,100 | 10.3 | 1,800 |
| Dependent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $32,000 | 62.6 | 3,400 | 28.8 | 1,400 | 19.0 | 1,700 | 8.4 | 1,100 |
| $32,000–92,000 | 14.4 | 1,800 | 15.6 | 1,100 | 16.5 | 2,100 | 12.4 | 1,200 |
| More than $92,000 | 0.3 | ‡ | 8.0 | 1,400 | 8.0 | 2,600 | 7.6 | 2,400 |
| Independent income | | | | | | | | |
| Less than $25,000 | 65.0 | 3,600 | 24.6 | 1,300 | 12.7 | 1,100 | 8.2 | 1,600 |
| $25,000 or more | 29.2 | 2,500 | 15.9 | 1,200 | 10.6 | 1,100 | 14.1 | 2,000 |

‡ Reporting standards not met.

NOTE: Federal grants are Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG), and a small percentage of grants and scholarships from other federal programs. State and institutional grants include any grants, scholarships, or tuition waivers that are funded by a state or by the institution attended, respectively. Other grants include grants and scholarships from private sources outside of the institution, including tuition aid from employers. Students may receive grants from more than one source. Full-time/full-year students were enrolled full time for 9 or more months from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004. Independent students are age 24 or older and students younger than age 24 who are married, have dependents, are veterans, or are orphans or wards of the courts. Other undergraduates younger than age 24 are considered to be dependent. For dependent students, income is the income of their parents. Independent student income includes the income of a spouse if the student is married. Income is total income in 2002. Prior year (2002) income is used in federal need analysis. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: Berkner, L., Wei, C.C., He, S., Lew, S., Cominole, M., and Siegel, P. (2005). *2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04): Undergraduate Financial Aid Estimates for 2003–04 by Type of Institution* (NCES 2005-163), table 14. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Relatively small proportions of community college students received other forms of grants including those awarded by the state and the institution. For example, about 11 percent of community college students received state grants averaging about $1,000, and 8 percent received grants from the institution averaging about $1,200.

## Community College Track

In a recent report, Adelman (2005) used data from the postsecondary transcripts of 1992 high school graduates to develop "portraits" of six distinct populations who attend community colleges. These portraits were based on the credits earned by traditional college-age students (23 or younger) in various degree programs. The first two portraits described students likely to persist and included students in (1) traditional academic paths leading to a transfer and bachelor's degree, and (2) occupational credential paths leading to vocational credentials or associate's degrees awarded by community colleges. The remaining four groups of students were much less successful in earning credits and completing credentials. These groups included (3) students with relatively weak high school academic preparation who struggled to acquire community college credits and then stopped; (4) students who withdrew almost immediately after enrollment with few if any credits earned; (5) those who were based in other institutions (i.e., taking most courses in another institution, primarily in 4-year colleges); and (6) a small population of "reverse transfers" with "declining momentum toward credentials at any level."

The analysis presented here draws on Adelman's model to illuminate the educational track of all students enrolled in community colleges in 2003–04. While Adelman's model focused entirely on traditional college-age students using 8 years of transcript data, this study encompasses all community college students and is limited to information collected for 1 academic year.

This study developed a taxonomy called the "Community College Track," which classifies students by their relative commitment to completing their respective degree programs. Three levels of commitment are identified: more committed, less committed, and not committed. The criteria used for defining degree commitment are discussed in detail in the next section of the report. But operationally, students were considered "more committed" if they attended college at least half time throughout their enrollment and reported that transferring to a 4-year institution or completing an associate's degree or vocational certificate were reasons for enrolling. If students did not meet these criteria, but were enrolled in a formal degree program, they were classified as less committed. The remaining students were classified as not committed (i.e., they were not enrolled in a formal degree program and did not report intentions of transferring to a 4-year college).

Students were divided into their respective degree programs based on information they provided in the student interview and on information obtained from the community college. Intent to transfer to a 4-year institution was almost entirely self-reported and students who reported this as a reason for enrolling were classified as transfers regardless of their degree program.[10] Students who did not report intent to transfer, but whose institutions reported them in associate's or certificate programs, were classified accordingly. The distinction between general and applied associate's degree programs (AA) was based entirely on student responses to a question asking them if they were pursuing a general associate's degree or an occupational or technical degree (applied AA). Community college students are distributed within the Community College Track as follows:

**More Committed (49 percent)**

- 4-year transfer track (29 percent)
- General associate's degree program (9 percent)
- Applied associate's degree program (7 percent)
- Certificate track (4 percent)

**Less Committed (39 percent)**

- 4-year transfer track (9 percent)
- General associate's degree program (17 percent)
- Applied associate's degree program (9 percent)
- Certificate track (4 percent)

**Not Committed (12 percent)**

## Defining Commitment to Degree Program

In order to classify community college students into a program of study that takes into account their likelihood of success, this study developed a measure of students' commitment toward completing a program. The commitment measure is based on two factors known to be associated with degree completion: college attendance intensity and reported intentions to either transfer to a 4-year college or complete a credential at the community college.

[10] In a few instances, institutions reported that students were in transfer or bachelor's degree programs. These students were classified as "less committed" 4-year transfers because they did not report the intent to transfer as a reason for enrolling.

## *College Attendance*

A large body of research has shown that students who attend college full time are much more likely to complete a degree (e.g., Carroll 1989; Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003). However, many of these studies focus on 4-year college students and, as was shown in figure 3-A, relatively few community college students attend full time. Indeed, community colleges tend to serve students who, because of family, work, or other responsibilities, are only able to attend on a part-time basis. Thus, setting the criterion too strictly could result in losing many students who might be strongly committed to finishing a course of study. For this study, therefore, taking two classes per term was determined to be a sufficient indicator of commitment to a program of study. This attendance criterion was operationally translated to attending at least half time for their college enrollment period during the year under study. Overall, about 26 percent of community college students did not meet this attendance level (table 5). However, among students classified as less committed, 50 percent attended less than half time.

**Table 5. Percentage distribution of community college students' attendance for all months enrolled, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| | Attendance intensity | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Community college track | Exclusively full-time | More than half-time | Less than half-time |
| Total | 30.6 | 43.1 | 26.3 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | |
| More committed | 43.1 | 56.9 | † |
| 4-year transfer | 45.7 | 54.4 | † |
| General associate's degree | 36.3 | 63.8 | † |
| Applied associate's degree | 42.9 | 57.1 | † |
| Certificate | 39.4 | 60.6 | † |
| Less committed | 19.7 | 30.1 | 50.1 |
| 4-year transfer | 6.4 | 8.7 | 84.9 |
| General associate's degree | 23.1 | 34.5 | 42.4 |
| Applied associate's degree | 23.0 | 39.1 | 37.9 |
| Certificate | 26.1 | 36.8 | 37.2 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 15.3 | 29.0 | 55.7 |

† Not applicable.

[1] All students classified as "more committed" were required to attend at least half time, so no members of this group appear in the "less than half time" column. The criterion for being classified as "more committed" is reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria but who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

While students who were classified as more committed were required to have attended at least half time, as might be expected, larger proportions attended full time, compared with their counterparts classified as less committed. For example, nearly one-half (46 percent) of the more committed 4-year transfer students attended full time, whereas most of the less committed 4-year transfer track students (85 percent) attended less than half time. Students in the less committed 4-year transfer track were the most likely to attend less than half time, even more so than those in the nondegree track. Roughly 40 percent of the less committed students in associate's or certificate tracks (37 to 42 percent) attended less than half time, and they were less likely to do so than non-degree-track students (56 percent).

### *Reasons for Attending*

Individual intentions or degree goals are important predictors of successful completion of postsecondary education (Tinto 1993). Intent, therefore, was the second criterion for demonstrating commitment to a program of study. In the NPSAS survey, intent was captured by questions asked of the students about why they had enrolled in a community college. Students were given the opportunity to cite a number of reasons for attending, which included transfer to a 4-year college and completion of an AA degree or certificate. Students could also report reasons related to personal interest or obtaining job skills. The data are shown in table 6. It is clear from this table that students often reported multiple reasons and that many reported personal interest as a reason for attending (46 percent). About 42 percent reported obtaining job skills or completing an AA as reasons and 36 percent reported the intent to transfer to a 4-year college.

By definition, students classified as more committed were required to cite transferring to a 4-year institution (4-year transfer group) or obtaining a credential at the community college (AA and certificate groups) as reasons for enrolling. Thus, the tables show 100 percent of the more committed students reporting these reasons in their respective programs (i.e., 100 percent of 4-year transfer students reported transfer as a reason for enrolling, and likewise, 100 percent of AA students reported completing an AA as a reason for enrolling).

Among students classified as less committed, roughly 16 percent of those in either the general or applied AA track claimed that completing an associate's degree was a reason for enrolling while the majority reported enrolling for personal interest (60 and 57 percent, respectively). Similarly, 13 percent of the less committed certificate students reported completing a certificate as a reason for enrolling, compared with 48 percent who cited personal interest and 56 percent who cited job skills as reasons for enrolling. It is also interesting to note that students in the less committed certificate track reported intentions of obtaining an AA more often than obtaining a certificate (24 vs. 13 percent).

**Table 6. Percentage of community college students reporting various reasons for enrolling, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Transfer to a 4-year college | Complete associate's degree | Complete certificate | Job skills | Personal interest | Transfer to another college |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 36.5 | 42.8 | 17.0 | 41.6 | 46.0 | 15.3 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | | |
| More committed | 60.2 | 63.0 | 24.5 | 40.1 | 36.7 | 18.7 |
| 4-year transfer | 100.0 | 50.5 | 20.6 | 35.3 | 35.1 | 21.9 |
| General associate's degree | † | 100.0 | 14.0 | 41.7 | 38.0 | 17.8 |
| Applied associate's degree | † | 100.0 | 13.6 | 52.7 | 38.7 | 11.8 |
| Certificate | † | 5.9 | 100.0 | 51.3 | 42.8 | 8.4 |
| Less committed | 18.1 | 23.7 | 8.4 | 41.7 | 54.8 | 12.4 |
| 4-year transfer | 82.6 [2] | 45.9 | 17.1 | 38.4 | 45.4 | 21.2 |
| General associate's degree | † | 16.6 | 4.9 | 37.1 | 59.9 | 12.1 |
| Applied associate's degree | † | 16.4 | 5.2 | 47.5 | 56.5 | 6.6 |
| Certificate | † | 24.2 | 12.6 | 56.4 | 47.8 | 8.1 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | † | 22.6 | 14.5 | 47.1 | 55.6 | 11.0 |

† Not applicable.

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students reporting transferring to a 4-year institution as a reason for enrolling were classified in the 4-year transfer track regardless of their degree program or other reasons for enrolling (i.e., they could have reported both transfer and earning an associate's degree as reasons for enrolling, but transfer took precedence in the classification). The other criterion for "more committed" is attending classes at least half time. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).

[2] In a few cases the school reported student was in a transfer program but the student did not, which is why this is not 100 percent.

NOTE: Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

In terms of their reported interest in obtaining a degree, students in the less committed AA tracks were less likely than those in the nondegree track to report intentions of earning an AA, (16 percent and 17 percent vs. 23 percent). This raises the question of why students classified as less committed in the AA tracks were enrolled in formal degree programs. It may be that obtaining new skills was the most important reason for them to attend a community college and that earning a degree was simply a means of doing so and thus a less important reason. Alternatively, these students may have needed to enroll in a formal credential program to obtain financial aid or to take the courses of interest to them. At the same time, when these students were asked about their ultimate degree objectives, at least three-fourths said they hoped to earn at

least a bachelor's degree one day.[11] Similarly, other research based on a longitudinal survey of first-time freshmen in 1995–96 found that when students were asked specifically about what degree they expected to obtain at the community college, nearly 85 percent reported that they expected to complete a subbaccalaureate credential or transfer to a 4-year institution (Hoachlander, Sikora, and Horn 2003). Yet, according to the results of the current study, when given the opportunity to report more than one reason for enrolling, a relatively large proportion of community college students do not report transfer or completing a credential as a reason for enrolling.[12]

Students who enroll in degree programs but are not necessarily interested in completing a credential may be analogous to what Adelman (2005) termed "visitors" in his analysis of community college students. Visitors attend for relatively short periods of time, earn fewer than 30 credits at the community college, and, when they leave, tend to leave the system entirely rather than transfer. Among the high school cohort analyzed by Adelman, 46 percent were identified as visitors. As discussed earlier and shown in figure B, 39 percent of community college students were classified as less committed in this analysis. These are students enrolled in formal degree programs but who did not meet all three criteria for strong commitment designation.

## Student Characteristics

Who are the students in each community college track, and how do they differ with respect to age and other demographic characteristics? Given the broad spectrum of programs community colleges offer, one would expect the community college track to vary with demographic characteristics, in particular with age. Indeed, this was the case.

### *Age*

As shown in table 7, traditional college-age students (younger than 24) constituted roughly two-thirds of those in the more committed 4-year transfer track (67 percent) and roughly one-half of those in the more committed general AA track (49 percent). Among those in AA programs, younger students made up larger proportions in general AA programs than in applied programs, and in both the more committed (49 percent vs. 42 percent) and less committed AA tracks (42 percent vs. 35 percent).

[11] NPSAS:04 Undergraduate Data Analysis System (data not shown).

[12] It should be noted, however, that students in the NPSAS survey represent all college students while those in the BPS survey represent first-time college students. Thus, educational expectations of the two groups may differ to a certain extent.

**Table 7. Age distribution of community college students as of 12/31/03, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | 23 years or younger | 24–29 years | 30 years or older |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 47.0 | 18.2 | 34.8 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | |
| More committed | 58.0 | 18.0 | 24.0 |
| 4-year transfer | 66.7 | 15.7 | 17.6 |
| General associate's degree | 48.8 | 19.5 | 31.7 |
| Applied associate's degree | 41.6 | 24.0 | 34.4 |
| Certificate | 42.1 | 21.5 | 36.4 |
| Less committed | 39.5 | 18.5 | 42.0 |
| 4-year transfer | 44.8 | 20.6 | 34.6 |
| General associate's degree | 42.1 | 17.7 | 40.2 |
| Applied associate's degree | 34.6 | 18.0 | 47.4 |
| Certificate | 27.1 | 18.9 | 54.0 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 26.2 | 18.1 | 55.7 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Students in their 30s or older made up 42 percent of those enrolled in the less committed certificate track and a majority of the students in the nondegree track (56 percent). It is also worth noting that students in their mid-to-late 20s, who constituted 18 percent of all community college students, tended to be overrepresented in the more committed applied AA track and underrepresented in the more committed 4-year transfer track (24 and 16 percent, respectively).

## *Gender*

Gender differences also were evident among the community college tracks (table 8). For example, while women constituted 59 percent of all community college students, they made up 67 percent of the more committed applied AA students. In both the more committed AA tracks, women constituted greater proportions than they did in the 4-year track (64 and 67 percent vs. 56 percent). In contrast, men made up a greater proportion of the more committed 4-year track than they did of the more committed AA tracks. This finding is consistent with studies showing that

**Table 8. Gender distribution of community college students, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 40.9 | 59.1 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | |
| More committed | 40.8 | 59.2 |
| 4-year transfer | 44.2 | 55.8 |
| General associate's degree | 36.2 | 63.8 |
| Applied associate's degree | 33.0 | 67.0 |
| Certificate | 39.4 | 60.6 |
| Less committed | 40.6 | 59.4 |
| 4-year transfer | 41.8 | 58.2 |
| General associate's degree | 40.3 | 59.7 |
| Applied associate's degree | 39.1 | 60.9 |
| Certificate | 43.2 | 56.8 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 42.2 | 57.8 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

men with bachelor's degree intentions are more likely than women to enroll in community colleges, while women are more likely to enroll in 4-year institutions (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2003).

## *Dependency and Family Status*

Students' dependency and family status varied as expected with the community college track (table 9). For example, dependent students (age 23 or younger by definition) made up the majority (57 percent) of the more committed 4-year transfer students. Dependent students also accounted for 39 percent of the more committed general AA students and about one-third of the more committed applied AA and certificate-seeking students.

Independent students with families tended to be overrepresented in the less committed certificate track. Specifically, 29 percent of students in the less committed certificate track were married parents, compared with 20 percent of all community college students; and 20 percent of

**Table 9. Percentage distribution of community college students' dependency and family status, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Dependent | Among independents | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No dependents, unmarried | Married, no dependents | Single parent | Married parent |
| Total | 38.8 | 16.2 | 9.7 | 15.4 | 20.0 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | |
| More committed | 48.8 | 13.7 | 7.1 | 14.6 | 15.8 |
| 4-year transfer | 57.3 | 12.6 | 5.7 | 11.8 | 12.5 |
| General associate's degree | 38.5 | 14.3 | 8.1 | 19.1 | 20.1 |
| Applied associate's degree | 33.3 | 15.8 | 10.3 | 18.0 | 22.7 |
| Certificate | 34.0 | 16.7 | 10.2 | 19.5 | 19.5 |
| Less committed | 31.9 | 17.9 | 10.8 | 16.2 | 23.3 |
| 4-year transfer | 35.5 | 17.2 | 9.9 | 14.3 | 23.1 |
| General associate's degree | 34.8 | 18.7 | 10.7 | 15.2 | 20.6 |
| Applied associate's degree | 27.6 | 16.9 | 11.0 | 18.5 | 26.1 |
| Certificate | 21.0 | 18.3 | 12.6 | 19.2 | 29.0 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 20.4 | 21.1 | 16.3 | 16.0 | 26.2 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

students in the less committed certificate track were single parents, compared with 15 percent of all community college students.

## *Race and Ethnicity*

Variations in the community college track by students' race/ethnicity also were evident (table 10). Compared with all community college students, White students were overrepresented in the more committed applied AA track, while Hispanic students were underrepresented. That is, 60 percent of all community college students were White, compared with 69 percent of more committed applied AA students. Conversely, 14 percent of all community college students were Hispanic, compared with 9 percent in the more committed applied AA track.

**Table 10. Race/ethnicity distribution of community college students, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | White | Black | Hispanic | Asian | American Indian | Pacific Islander | Multiple races or other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 59.9 | 15.3 | 14.4 | 5.3 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 3.4 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | | | |
| More committed | 59.9 | 16.1 | 14.4 | 4.7 | 0.9 | 0.6 | 3.4 |
| 4-year transfer | 58.2 | 15.4 | 15.5 | 5.9 | 1.0 | 0.6 | 3.5 |
| General associate's degree | 59.9 | 16.8 | 15.5 | 3.4 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 3.0 |
| Applied associate's degree | 68.5 | 17.1 | 8.9 | 1.8 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 2.4 |
| Certificate | 58.7 | 19.1 | 12.3 | 4.1 | 0.6 | 0.2 | 5.0 |
| Less committed | 58.7 | 16.4 | 13.7 | 5.7 | 1.2 | 0.7 | 3.6 |
| 4-year transfer | 55.9 | 13.9 | 16.5 | 7.3 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 4.7 |
| General associate's degree | 57.1 | 15.7 | 14.6 | 6.4 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 3.8 |
| Applied associate's degree | 64.2 | 18.2 | 10.4 | 3.1 | 0.9 | 0.1 | 3.1 |
| Certificate | 58.7 | 21.2 | 11.1 | 5.3 | 2.1 | 0.4 | 1.3 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 64.0 | 8.6 | 16.8 | 6.0 | 1.2 | 0.7 | 2.7 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, American Indian includes Alaska Native, Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian, and Other includes respondents having origins in a race not listed. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

In the more committed 4-year transfer track, 15 percent were either Black or Hispanic students. However, higher proportions of Black than Hispanic students were enrolled in the occupational tracks (i.e., applied AA and certificate programs). For example, 17 percent of Black versus 9 percent of Hispanic students were classified in the more committed applied AA track, and 19 percent of Black versus 12 percent of Hispanic students were classified in the more committed certificate group. Conversely, nondegree students were more likely to be Hispanic (17 percent) than Black (9 percent). In other words, the data suggest that Black students were more likely to enroll in community colleges for vocational training than were Hispanics, while Hispanic students were more likely to attend classes that do not necessarily lead to a formal degree. It is likely that some Hispanic students are taking English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to strengthen their English language skills.

## Fields of Study

Table 11 displays the fields of study for each community college track. Because the tracks contain both occupational and academic degree programs, one would expect fields of study patterns to vary accordingly. For example, students in both general AA programs tended to be overrepresented in humanities fields when compared with community college students as a whole (20 vs. 15 percent), whereas those in both applied AA programs were overrepresented in health fields (40 and 33 percent vs. 24 percent). Yet even within occupational tracks, students in the more committed applied AA track were more likely to major in health-related fields than students in the less committed applied AA tracks (40 vs. 33 percent).

**Table 11. Percentage distribution of community college students' major field of study, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Humanities | Social/ behavioral sciences | Mathematics and science | Computer/ information science | Engineering | Education | Business/ management | Health | Vocational/ technical | Other technical/ professional |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 14.8 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 6.1 | 4.1 | 8.1 | 18.4 | 23.9 | 4.9 | 11.1 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | | | | | | |
| More committed | 15.3 | 5.2 | 3.8 | 6.0 | 3.8 | 8.7 | 18.1 | 23.8 | 4.1 | 11.2 |
| 4-year transfer | 17.7 | 6.7 | 5.0 | 5.5 | 4.0 | 10.5 | 18.5 | 18.3 | 3.3 | 10.5 |
| General associate's degree | 19.9 | 4.4 | 2.7 | 4.7 | 2.2 | 9.0 | 18.4 | 24.2 | 2.1 | 12.5 |
| Applied associate's degree | 4.2 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 8.7 | 4.9 | 4.0 | 16.8 | 40.5 | 7.2 | 11.3 |
| Certificate | 9.8 | 4.5 | 3.1 | 6.9 | 4.1 | 4.8 | 16.8 | 28.2 | 9.0 | 12.9 |
| Less committed | 14.1 | 4.7 | 3.4 | 6.3 | 4.5 | 7.4 | 18.9 | 24.1 | 5.8 | 10.9 |
| 4-year transfer | 14.3 | 7.3 | 5.3 | 6.2 | 4.1 | 9.6 | 24.6 | 17.2 | 3.5 | 8.0 |
| General associate's degree | 20.3 | 5.4 | 4.0 | 4.9 | 4.1 | 9.6 | 18.7 | 20.3 | 2.4 | 10.5 |
| Applied associate's degree | 6.6 | 2.9 | 2.0 | 9.4 | 5.6 | 3.4 | 17.9 | 32.6 | 7.3 | 12.4 |
| Certificate | 4.3 | 1.4 | 0.8 | 5.5 | 4.6 | 3.8 | 13.2 | 31.1 | 21.1 | 14.3 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | † | † | † | † | † | † | † | † | † | † |

† Not applicable.

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

One other difference of note was evident between the two 4-year transfer groups. Compared with all community college students, the more committed 4-year transfer students were more likely to major in education (11 vs. 8 percent), whereas the less committed group majored in business and management more often than community college students as a whole (25 vs. 18 percent).

## Remedial Courses and Cumulative Grade Point Average

The community college track revealed relatively few variations with respect to participation in remedial education (table 12). For example, when asked whether they were currently taking any remedial courses, 22 percent of the more committed general AA students reported doing so, compared with 17 percent of all community college students. The more committed general AA

**Table 12. Percentage of community college students who reported taking remedial courses in the current year, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Any remedial courses | English | Mathematics | Reading | Study skills | Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 16.5 | 4.9 | 13.2 | 4.9 | 1.7 | 5.0 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | | |
| More committed | 19.7 | 5.7 | 15.8 | 5.9 | 1.9 | 6.1 |
| 4-year transfer | 19.7 | 5.9 | 15.7 | 6.0 | 2.1 | 6.5 |
| General associate's degree | 22.0 | 5.9 | 17.9 | 6.7 | 1.3 | 5.6 |
| Applied associate's degree | 18.5 | 4.5 | 15.3 | 4.8 | 2.2 | 5.5 |
| Certificate | 15.6 | 5.2 | 12.3 | 5.2 | 1.8 | 4.8 |
| Less committed | 15.4 | 4.5 | 12.1 | 4.4 | 1.8 | 4.6 |
| 4-year transfer | 12.3 | 2.9 | 9.9 | 3.5 | 2.3 | 3.9 |
| General associate's degree | 16.8 | 5.4 | 12.9 | 5.1 | 1.7 | 5.4 |
| Applied associate's degree | 15.7 | 4.0 | 12.7 | 4.2 | 1.5 | 4.3 |
| Certificate | 14.7 | 5.8 | 11.5 | 4.3 | 1.8 | 3.3 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 7.8 | 2.6 | 6.0 | 2.1 | 0.9 | 2.2 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Only students who were in their first or second year of college were asked the remedial education questions, so a small percentage of community college students in their third year or higher are not included. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

students also were more likely to report taking remedial mathematics courses than community college students as a whole (18 vs. 13 percent). The more committed 4-year transfer students participated in remedial education more often than those in the less committed group, both overall (20 vs. 12 percent) and in specific areas. For example, they were more likely than the less committed 4-year transfer students to have taken remedial mathematics (16 vs. 10 percent) and English courses (6 vs. 3 percent).

Being classified as more committed was not necessarily associated with earning higher grades in 2003–04 (table 13). In fact, consistent with their greater participation in remedial courses, the more committed 4-year transfer students were less likely than their peers in the less committed 4-year transfer track to have earned mostly A's (12 vs. 19 percent) and more likely to have earned C's and D's or lower (14 vs. 10 percent). This difference may be due to the heavier course load carried by the more committed group, nearly half of whom attend full time

**Table 13. Percentage distribution of community college students' cumulative grades, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Mostly A's | A's and B's | Mostly B's | B's and C's | Mostly C's | C's and D's or lower |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 18.3 | 11.5 | 25.2 | 14.1 | 19.5 | 11.5 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | | | |
| More committed | 13.2 | 11.5 | 25.6 | 16.2 | 21.0 | 13.0 |
| 4-year transfer | 11.9 | 10.8 | 25.7 | 16.2 | 21.4 | 14.0 |
| General associate's degree | 13.4 | 12.1 | 24.8 | 15.6 | 20.7 | 13.5 |
| Applied associate's degree | 16.6 | 13.3 | 26.9 | 14.9 | 20.4 | 7.8 |
| Certificate | 16.7 | 11.5 | 24.4 | 14.7 | 19.4 | 13.3 |
| Less committed | 18.7 | 11.2 | 19.9 | 13.4 | 25.1 | 11.7 |
| 4-year transfer | 18.9 | 12.3 | 25.6 | 13.8 | 19.2 | 10.1 |
| General associate's degree | 15.8 | 11.1 | 25.6 | 13.3 | 21.4 | 12.8 |
| Applied associate's degree | 20.8 | 12.4 | 23.6 | 14.0 | 19.5 | 9.7 |
| Certificate | 27.0 | 11.3 | 25.0 | 11.2 | 15.8 | 9.8 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 37.1 | 10.9 | 24.0 | 9.2 | 12.0 | 6.8 |

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

(46 percent), while most of their less committed peers attend less than half time (as was shown in table 5). In addition, more committed 4-year transfer track students tend to be younger than their less committed peers and younger students earn lower grades in general than those who are older.[13]

Students in nondegree programs earned the highest grades more often than community college students as a whole (37 vs. 18 percent). These students tend to be older and often take one course at a time for their own personal enrichment. Otherwise, as with remedial coursetaking, obvious associations between grades and the community college track were not evident.

## One-Year Enrollment Continuity

Even though the NPSAS:04 survey represents one point in time, the study collected information that spanned the 2003–04 academic year. In particular, students reported whether they had obtained or expected to obtain a credential in that year and which months they were enrolled. These two variables were combined to derive a measure of 1-year enrollment continuity. Specifically, if students had obtained or expected to obtain a credential in 2003–04 or were enrolled for 9 or more months,[14] they were considered to have shown strong enrollment continuity for the academic year.

Table 14-A displays the results. The findings clearly show that a greater proportion of students who were identified as more committed to their program of study maintained strong enrollment continuity for 1 year than did less committed students (83 vs. 70 percent). Moreover, within each individual track, the likelihood of maintaining strong enrollment continuity for 1 year was higher for students identified as more committed than it was for those identified as less committed. For example, 83 percent of the more committed 4-year transfer students had persisted, compared with 58 percent of their less committed 4-year transfer counterparts. Likewise, 86 percent of the more committed applied AA students maintained strong enrollment continuity, compared with 73 percent of their less committed counterparts.

[13] See compendium table 2.3.

[14] Only students enrolled in the fall were included in this analysis, so that participants had the same amount of time in which to achieve the 9-month threshold for persistence. Overall, 79 percent of community college students were enrolled in the fall, though students in the more committed applied AA and 4-year transfer tracks (82 percent) were more likely and those in the nondegree program (61 percent) were less likely than students in other tracks to be enrolled in the fall (ranging from 65 percent of those in the less committed 4-year transfer track to 79 percent in the more committed general AA track). Data not shown.

**Table 14-A. Percentage of community college students who attained a credential, attended 9 months or more, or did neither among those enrolled in the fall, by the community college track: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Maintained enrollment continuity: Total | Attained credential | Attended 9 months or more | Did not attain and attended less than 9 months |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 76.0 | 14.3 | 61.7 | 24.0 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | |
| More committed | 83.3 | 16.9 | 66.4 | 16.7 |
| 4-year transfer | 82.9 | 15.3 | 67.6 | 17.1 |
| General associate's degree | 84.0 | 15.8 | 68.1 | 16.1 |
| Applied associate's degree | 86.3 | 22.1 | 64.2 | 13.7 |
| Certificate | 80.1 | 23.7 | 56.4 | 20.0 |
| Less committed | 70.3 | 14.5 | 55.8 | 29.7 |
| 4-year transfer | 58.4 | 11.5 | 46.9 | 41.6 |
| General associate's degree | 72.9 | 12.8 | 60.2 | 27.1 |
| Applied associate's degree | 73.1 | 14.4 | 58.6 | 26.9 |
| Certificate | 74.2 | 28.8 | 45.4 | 25.8 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 57.5 | † | 57.5 | 42.5 |

† Not applicable.

[1] The criteria for being classified as "more committed" include attending classes at least half time and reporting that transferring to a 4-year institution (for 4-year transfer track) or earning a credential (for associate's and certificate tracks) are reasons for attending. Students not meeting these criteria who are enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Among certificate-seeking students, although a greater percentage of those in the more committed track had maintained strong enrollment continuity (80 vs. 74 percent), it appears as though students in the less committed track may have completed a credential at a higher rate (29 vs. 24 percent). However, the difference was not statistically significant. It is also possible that certificate-seeking students in the more committed track are in longer programs, which would coincide with the finding showing a greater percentage of the more committed group being enrolled for 9 or more months relative to their less committed peers (56 vs. 45 percent).

Not surprisingly, students classified as not committed were less likely to have maintained strong enrollment continuity over 1 year than students identified as either more or less committed (58 percent vs. 83 and 70 percent, respectively). It is of interest to note, however, the enrollment continuity of non-degree-track students relative to those in the less committed AA tracks (both

general and applied) in light of the fact that the AA students had reported degree completion as a reason for enrolling less often than did nondegree students (see table 6). Nevertheless, as shown in table 14-A, students in the less committed AA tracks still maintained strong enrollment continuity at higher rates than nondegree students (73 vs. 58 percent). In other words, even though a relatively large proportion of less committed AA students did not report intentions of completing an AA, they were still more likely to maintain strong enrollment continuity than were those who were not enrolled in formal degree programs.

Unlike less committed AA and certificate students, who were more likely than nondegree students to maintain strong enrollment continuity, such a difference was not evident for 4-year transfer track students. Some 58 percent of both less committed 4-year transfer students and non-degree-track students maintained strong enrollment continuity. Thus, while less committed 4-year transfer students reported intentions of transferring to a 4-year college, their enrollment continuity did not distinguish them from students who were not enrolled in formal degree programs and who did not report such intentions.

Finally, because the community college track segregates students by age, with younger students concentrated in the more committed 4-year tracks and older students concentrated in the less committed occupational AA and certificate tracks (see table 7), it is important to examine enrollment continuity separately for younger and older students. Table 14-B displays the results for two age groups, 23 and younger and 24 and older. Within both the younger and the older age groups, greater proportions of students in the more committed than less committed tracks maintained strong enrollment continuity.[15] Moreover, while younger students were somewhat more likely to maintain strong enrollment continuity than their older peers overall (78 vs. 74 percent), differences between age groups were detected in just two individual tracks—less committed AA (65 vs. 55 percent) and nondegree tracks (65 vs. 54 percent), with younger students more likely than older students to maintain strong enrollment continuity. Yet in the AA track where the difference in age groups was observed, both younger and older students in the more committed track experienced higher rates of strong enrollment continuity than did those in the less committed track. In other words, among both older and younger students alike, those identified as more committed to their programs of study were more likely to exhibit strong enrollment continuity than were their counterparts identified as less committed.

[15] The one exception is for certificate-seeking students. While it appears as though the more committed groups maintain strong enrollment continuity more often than the less committed groups, due in part to small sample sizes and large standard errors, in both the older and the younger age groups, differences were not statistically significant.

**Table 14-B. Percentage of community college students who attained a credential, attended 9 months or more, or did neither among those enrolled in the fall, by the community college track and age group: 2003–04**

| Community college track | Maintained enrollment continuity | | | Did not attain and attended less than 9 months |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Attained credential | Attended 9 months or more | |
| **Age 23 or younger** | | | | |
| Total | 78.3 | 13.1 | 65.3 | 21.7 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | |
| More committed | 82.6 | 14.9 | 67.7 | 17.4 |
| 4-year transfer | 82.5 | 14.0 | 68.6 | 17.5 |
| General associate's degree | 82.8 | 13.8 | 69.0 | 17.2 |
| Applied associate's degree | 85.4 | 20.6 | 64.9 | 14.6 |
| Certificate | 77.4 | 19.9 | 57.5 | 22.6 |
| Less committed | 71.9 | 11.8 | 60.1 | 28.1 |
| 4-year transfer | 57.7 | 10.6 | 47.1 | 42.3 |
| General associate's degree | 74.8 | 10.9 | 63.9 | 25.2 |
| Applied associate's degree | 78.3 | 13.2 | 65.1 | 21.7 |
| Certificate | 71.2 | 18.0 | 53.2 | 28.8 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 65.0 | † | 65.0 | 35.0 |
| **Age 24 or older** | | | | |
| Total | 73.7 | 15.6 | 58.1 | 26.3 |
| Commitment to degree program[1] | | | | |
| More committed | 84.4 | 19.9 | 64.5 | 15.6 |
| 4-year transfer | 83.6 | 18.1 | 65.5 | 16.4 |
| General associate's degree | 85.1 | 17.9 | 67.2 | 14.9 |
| Applied associate's degree | 87.0 | 23.3 | 63.7 | 13.0 |
| Certificate | 82.1 | 26.6 | 55.5 | 17.9 |
| Less committed | 69.2 | 16.5 | 52.8 | 30.8 |
| 4-year transfer | 59.0 | 12.3 | 46.8 | 41.0 |
| General associate's degree | 71.4 | 14.4 | 57.0 | 28.6 |
| Applied associate's degree | 70.0 | 15.1 | 54.9 | 30.0 |
| Certificate | 75.3 | 32.7 | 42.6 | 24.8 |
| Not committed (no degree program) | 54.3 | † | 54.3 | 45.7 |

† Not applicable.

[1] Criteria to be classified as "more committed" include: attended college at least half time, and reported that transferring to a 4-year college (for 4-year transfer track) or completing a credential (for associate's degree or certificate tracks) were reasons for enrolling. Students not meeting these criteria but enrolled in formal degree programs (or intending to transfer to a 4-year college) are classified as "less committed." Students not enrolled in any formal degree program and not intending to transfer to a 4-year college are classified as "not committed." Associate's degree types were identified by students in associate's degree programs who reported working on either a general education or transfer degree (general) or an occupational or a technical degree (applied).

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Estimates in the table include students enrolled in institutions in Puerto Rico, but because fewer than 30 community college students were enrolled in Puerto Rico, a separate total line excluding them is not shown. Standard error tables are available at http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

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# Summary and Conclusions

The Community College Track appeared to successfully differentiate among the diverse groups of students who attend community colleges. Students identified as more committed toward completing a program of study exhibited strong enrollment continuity more often than their counterparts identified as less committed. Overall, 83 percent of the more committed students had done so, compared with 70 percent of those identified as less committed and 58 percent of students classified as not committed.

The results of this study suggest that students who enroll in community colleges with a strong commitment toward completing a program of study, whether to transfer to a 4-year college or obtain a degree or certificate, maintain their enrollment for 1 year at relatively high rates. Yet such students made up just 49 percent of those enrolled in community colleges in 2003–04. They also tend to be younger and more traditional than students in less committed or nondegree tracks. Among the less committed students, about three-fourths of those enrolled in formal AA degree programs did not express an interest in completing a degree, while a clear majority reported personal interest as an important reason for enrolling. Despite their tentative commitment to obtaining a degree, however, these students showed strong enrollment continuity at higher rates than those who were not in a formal degree program.

The findings from this study help explain why community college students complete associate's degrees or certificates at relatively low rates. That is, graduation rates are typically based on all students enrolled in degree programs, yet findings from this study indicate that a substantial proportion of students enrolled in formal degree programs do not necessarily intend to complete a degree.

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