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The Road Less Traveled?

Students Who Enroll in Multiple Institutions

Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Report

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

As of 2001, 40 percent of students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in 1995–96 had attended more than one institution (table A). Over the course of the undergraduate education of 1999–2000 college graduates (first-time bachelor’s degree recipients), a majority (59 percent) had attended more than one institution (figure 3). Even among 1999–2000 bachelor’s degree recipients who began in 4-year institutions, about 47 percent had attended another institution at some point with or without transferring (table 8-A). Much of the research on students who attend multiple institutions has focused on those who make a permanent transition from one institution to another (Bradburn and Hurst 2001; McCormick 1997). For the most part, previous literature has not reported on the other ways in which students enroll in multiple institutions, including co-enrollment (i.e., attending more than one institution simultaneously, also called “overlapping enrollment” or “dual enrollment”) and attending another institution without transferring from the first institution. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the extent to which undergraduates attend multiple institutions as well as the relationship between multiple institution attendance and persistence, attainment, and time to degree. Students who attended multiple institutions are the population of interest here. Subsets of this population will also be examined—specifically, those who:

Table A. Percentage distribution (by columns) of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students by the type of the first institution attended, according to multiple institution attendance patterns

Attendance patterns	Total ¹	Type of first institution		
		Public 2-year	Public 4-year	Private not-for-profit 4-year
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of institutions attended				
One	59.7	52.8	61.2	62.8
More than one	40.4	47.2	38.9	37.2
Two	30.1	35.4	28.7	27.0
Three	8.6	10.2	8.3	8.0
Four or more	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.2
Co-enrolled				
Never co-enrolled	89.2	88.6	87.6	86.9
Sometimes co-enrolled	10.9	11.4	12.4	13.1
Transfer status				
Never transferred	67.9	58.5	73.0	76.3
Transferred	32.1	41.5	27.0	23.7
Once	25.9	34.3	21.0	17.4
Twice	5.7	7.0	5.3	5.3
Three times	0.5	0.2	0.6	1.0

¹ Total includes students who began at types of institutions not shown here.

NOTE: 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, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:96/01); and Berkner, L., He, S., and Forrest Cataldi, E. (2002). *Descriptive Summary of 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later* (NCES 2003–151).

- Attended two or more institutions at one time (co-enrolled),
- Transferred between institutions, or

- Began at a 4-year institution and attended a 2-year institution at some point.

This report focuses on both 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students and 1999–2000 bachelor’s degree recipients and is organized by survey and beginning institution type.

This analysis uses data from the 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) and the 2000/01 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:2000/01). BPS:96/01 is a longitudinal survey of students who first began their postsecondary education in 1995–96. The last follow-up survey was conducted in 2001, 6 years after students began their postsecondary education, by which time some students were no longer enrolled in postsecondary education, some had completed degrees or certificates, and some remained enrolled. B&B:2000/01 provides data on students who received a bachelor’s degree in the 1999–2000 academic year, regardless of when they began their postsecondary education. Both studies used in this report are based on a representative sample of postsecondary education institutions in the United States and Puerto Rico and the students within those institutions. This analysis examines differences in student enrollment patterns using standard t-tests to determine statistical significance, and a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to detect differential changes by testing for interaction effects. Statistical significances for both tests are reported at $p < 0.05$. Standard error tables are available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

Beginning Postsecondary Students

As of 2001, 40 percent of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students had attended more than one institution, including 32 percent who had transferred from one institution to another and 11

percent who had co-enrolled (table A).¹ Among beginning postsecondary students who had attended more than one institution, about one-quarter had attended more than two institutions (table 1).

Not surprisingly, students’ attendance patterns differed according to the level and control of institution they first attended. Students who began in 2-year institutions were more likely than students who began in 4-year institutions to attend more than one institution or to transfer (table A and table 2). For example, 47 percent of students who began in public 2-year institutions had attended more than one institution as of 2001, compared with 39 and 37 percent of students who began in public 4-year and private not-for-profit 4-year institutions, respectively. No difference, however, could be detected between students who began in 2-year and in 4-year institutions in their likelihood of ever co-enrolling. Among students who began in 4-year institutions, those in public institutions were more likely than their private not-for-profit counterparts to transfer or ever attend public 2-year institutions. Twenty-seven percent of those who started in public 4-year institutions had transferred and one-fifth had enrolled in public 2-year institutions, compared with 24 and 14 percent, respectively, of students who began in private not-for-profit 4-year institutions. No difference was detected between students in public and in private not-for-profit 4-year institutions in the number of institutions they attended or their likelihood of co-enrolling.

In general, among 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students, more traditional students, such as younger students and those who attended

¹ In this section, a student was considered to have transferred if that student left one institution and enrolled in another institution for at least 4 months and a student was considered to have co-enrolled if that student overlapped enrollment at more than one institution for at least 1 month.

full time, were more likely to attend multiple institutions than their older or part-time counterparts (tables 3-A and 3-B; tables 4-A and 4-B). Likewise, dependent students and those who did not delay their postsecondary enrollment were more likely to attend multiple institutions than their counterparts who were independent or who delayed their enrollment. For example, among students who began at 4-year institutions, 39 percent of dependent students had attended more than one institution as of 2001, compared with 27 percent of independent students. Conversely, students with more than one characteristic that placed them at risk of not completing postsecondary education were less likely than their counterparts with one or no such characteristics to attend multiple institutions.² However, these characteristics are also associated with students' likelihood of persisting in their postsecondary programs. The longer students persist, the more opportunity they have to attend more than one institution. Thus, to some extent, the association between these risk factors and multiple institution attendance may be due to the length of time students are enrolled.

The association between dependency status and multiple institution attendance was particularly apparent among students in public 2-year institutions, also known as community colleges. That is, in public 2-year institutions, dependent students were more likely than independent students to attend more than one institution (58 vs. 27 percent; table 3-A). This may be due, in part, to the fact that dependent students were more likely to transfer to 4-year institutions to earn a bachelor's degree than their independent peers.³

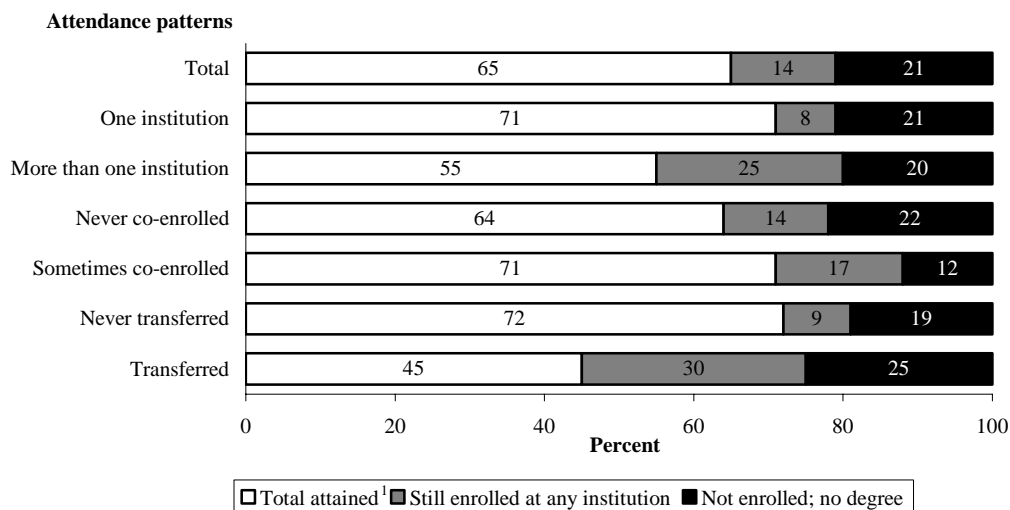
Similarly, independent students participate in programs leading to vocational certificates more often than dependent students (Horn, Peter, and Rooney 2002). Because these programs tend to be of short duration (i.e., 1 year or less), students may have less opportunity or reason to transfer. In addition, independent students are more likely to attend part time, which is also associated with lower rates of multiple institution attendance. Independent students are also more likely to have families, careers, and other responsibilities that may influence their ability to move from school to school. In contrast, dependent students are more likely to enroll in community colleges with the intention of transferring to a 4-year institution and attaining a bachelor's degree.

For 1995–96 postsecondary students beginning at 4-year institutions, multiple institution attendance was negatively related to degree attainment within 6 years. It appears, however, that for some students, multiple institution attendance may have only delayed attainment. For example, among students who began in 4-year institutions, those who attended more than one institution were less likely than students who attended only one institution to have attained any degree (55 vs. 71 percent); however, students attending more than one institution were more likely than those who attended one institution to still be enrolled in 2001 (25 vs. 8 percent) (figure A; table 4-C). About one-fifth of both groups were not enrolled and had not earned a degree. These results suggest that students who attended more than one institution may have needed more time to finish and that, given enough time, they may ultimately attain a degree. On the other hand, multiple institution attendance involving co-

² Persistence risk factors include delaying enrollment, having no high school diploma, enrolling part time, being financially independent, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, and working full time while enrolled. For more information, see Horn and Premo (1995).

³ BPS:96/01 Data Analysis System. Not shown in tables.

Figure A. Percentage distribution of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students in 4-year institutions according to 6-year persistence and attainment status, by multiple institution attendance patterns



¹Includes students who attained a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree, or certificate.

NOTE: 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, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:96/01).

enrollment appeared to be positively related to persistence and attainment.

Relationship of Specific Variables to Persistence, Attainment, and Time to Degree

In order to take into account the interrelationship of factors associated with multiple institution attendance, a multivariate analysis was conducted. The analysis examined the relationship between multiple institution attendance patterns and 6-year persistence and attainment among beginning postsecondary students (table 5). The analysis included students who began their postsecondary studies in 1995–96 at 4-year institutions with a bachelor’s degree goal and measured their likelihood of attaining a bachelor’s degree or being enrolled in 4-year

institutions 6 years later. It took into account beginning institution sector (i.e., public or private not-for-profit), types of multiple institution attendance, and several other variables associated with both multiple institution attendance and persistence, including income, GPA, and number of risk factors. After taking the covariation of these variables into account, the results still indicated that 6-year persistence was positively associated with co-enrolling and negatively associated with transferring and enrolling in public 2-year institutions.

Bachelor’s Degree Recipients

While the previous section focused on first-time beginners in postsecondary education, this section looks at students who attained bachelor’s degrees in 1999–2000 regardless of when they

began postsecondary education. The BPS survey included students who began postsecondary education in 1995–96 and, therefore, includes students who did not attain a degree as well as those who attained certificates, associate’s degrees, and bachelor’s degrees. B&B, however, looks retrospectively at those students who attained bachelor’s degrees in 1999–2000, regardless of their path to that degree or the time required to attain it. Therefore, these two cohorts are not directly comparable. This section will focus on bachelor’s degree recipients.

An examination of the multiple institution attendance patterns of 1999–2000 bachelor’s degree recipients revealed that a majority (59 percent) attended more than one institution during their undergraduate education, including 35 percent who transferred and 9 percent who co-enrolled at some point (figure 4).⁴ Among those who started at 4-year institutions, 37 percent had also attended 2-year institutions (table 8-A).

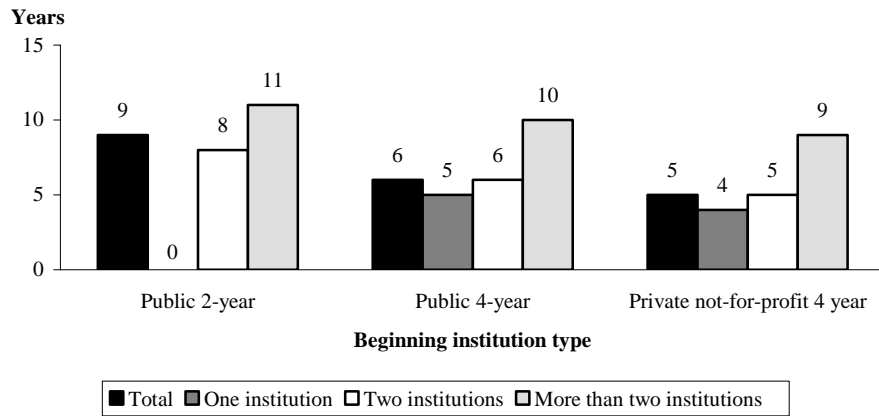
Among bachelor’s degree recipients, independent students, older students, and students with more persistence risk factors were more mobile during their postsecondary studies than dependent students, younger students, and students with fewer persistence risk factors (tables 7-A and 8-A). Although these findings appear to contradict the BPS findings, the populations are not comparable: unlike beginning postsecondary students—whose risk factors are identified when they first enroll—in the B&B study, most of college graduates’ risk factors are determined when they acquire their bachelor’s degree. Thus,

⁴ In this section, a student was considered to have transferred if that student indicated that he or she had attended more than one postsecondary institution before completing a bachelor’s degree and did so in order to transfer between schools, and a student was considered to have co-enrolled if that student enrolled at two or more institutions for more than 1 month within the academic year.

over the course of their enrollment, college graduates may become independent and develop additional persistence risk factors such as becoming a parent. Furthermore, students who take longer to attain a degree have more opportunities to attend multiple institutions and may not be captured in the BPS study which only encompasses 6 years. Also, participants in the B&B study have all obtained a bachelor’s degree—thus having overcome whatever persistence risk factors they may have at the time of the survey. When looking at specific persistence risk factors which measure characteristics of graduates when they began their postsecondary education, among college graduates who began at 4-year institutions, those who delayed entry into postsecondary education and those who worked full time during their first year enrolled were more likely than their counterparts who did not delay entry or work full time to attend multiple institutions (table 8-A).

Consistent with the results found for beginning postsecondary students in BPS:96/01 in which multiple institution attendance was associated with slowed progress toward degree or certificate attainment, data from B&B:2000/01 indicated that attending more than one institution was associated with slowed progress toward the bachelor’s degree (figure B). This may be related to the difficulty of transferring credits, different requirements at various institutions, or gaps in enrollment, or mitigating factors such as a move, job change, or change in family status. Other reasons or a combination of reasons may also influence progress toward the bachelor’s degree for students who attend multiple institutions. Among 1999–2000 bachelor’s degree recipients who began in 4-year institutions, as the number of institutions attended increased, so did the average time to completion (tables 8-B and 8-C). Co-enrolling and transferring among bachelor’s degree recipients

Figure B. Average time to degree for 1999–2000 first-time bachelor’s degree recipients according to multiple institution attendance patterns, by beginning institution type



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, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:96/01).

who began in 4-year institutions also resulted in their taking more time to complete a degree. However, differences by sector for these types of attendance patterns were observed.

In the B&B:2000/01 survey, college graduates were asked to report their main purpose for attending multiple institutions (table 6). As expected, those who began in public 2-year colleges were more likely than those who began in 4-year institutions to report transfer as their main purpose. That is, 63 percent of those who began in public 2-year colleges listed transfer as their main purpose for attending multiple institutions. However, about one-half of students who began in 4-year institutions (both public and private not-for-profit) also reported transfer as their main purpose. In addition, about one-third of bachelor’s degree recipients who began in 4-year institutions said they enrolled in more than one institution to take additional classes.

Conclusions

Attending more than one postsecondary institution during the course of undergraduate enrollment is a common practice. Among students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in 1995–96, 40 percent had attended more than one institution as of 2001, while among 2001 college graduates, nearly 60 percent had done so. As would be expected, students who began their postsecondary education in a community college were more likely to transfer than those who began in 4-year institutions, because community college students typically must transfer to earn a bachelor’s degree. Nevertheless, about one-quarter of those students who started in 4-year institutions had transferred as of 2001, and for them, transfer was associated with lower persistence rates. Among 1999–2000 bachelor’s degree recipients, attending more than one institution (or more than two institutions for those who began in community colleges), transferring, and co-enrolling were each associated

with longer average time to completion of their bachelor's degrees.

When taking risk status and other related variables into account, multivariate analyses of beginning postsecondary students who began their postsecondary education in a 4-year institution with a bachelor's degree goal indicated a negative association between transfer and persistence. That is, among these students, those who had transferred were less likely than those who had not

transferred to attain a degree or be enrolled in 4-year institutions 6 years after first enrolling in postsecondary education. As with transfer, beginning postsecondary students who began their postsecondary studies in a 4-year institution and who attended a community college at some time during their enrollment were less likely to persist for 6 years or to graduate than their counterparts who had not attended a community college. In contrast, beginning students who had ever co-enrolled were more likely to persist or attain a bachelor's degree than those who had not.