



The Other College

Retention and completion rates among two-year college students

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Introduction

Two-year colleges have long been the stepchildren of the higher education family of institutions, the so-called “other college,” despite the fact that they are the main contact with higher education for a large proportion of young people. In 2005, two-year college enrollment was almost 40 percent of total college enrollment.

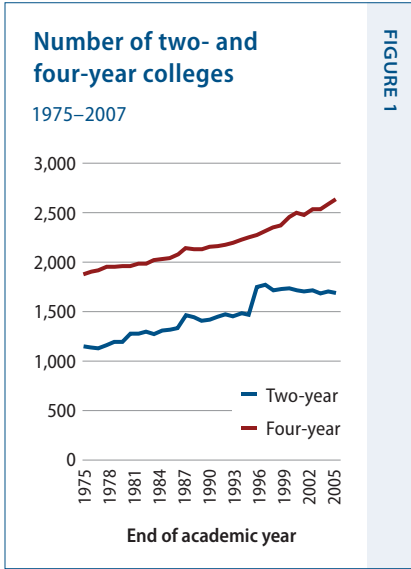
These 6.5 million students fare far worse than their four-year peers in persisting through postsecondary education until receiving a credential. Among first-time students who start at a four-year college, approximately three-quarters persist to the second year, compared to roughly half of first-time students who start at a two-year college. Moreover, within six years, students who begin at a four-year college are twice as likely as those who begin at a two-year college to earn a degree. And those students who have not yet completed a degree are much more likely to still be enrolled in college if they started at a four-year college than if they started at a two-year college.

This lack of persistence and degree completion presents a compelling challenge for education and economic policymakers since postsecondary education is key for both individual success and economic competitiveness in the global, knowledge-driven economy. However, encouraging degree completion among two-year college students is a complex issue due in large part to the dissimilarities between two- and four-year college students. Two-year college students are more than twice as likely to be enrolled part-time, and more than half of two-year college students are employed, compared to only 38 percent of four-year college students. Two-year college students are far less likely to be of traditional college-going age (18 to 24) than four-year college students, and they are also more likely to be of minority descent and from families of lower socioeconomic status. Finally, students who first attend two-year colleges are less academically prepared than students who first attend four-year colleges, whether this is measured by standardized test score, highest math course taken in high school, or participation in remedial education.

This paper shines much needed light on the complexity of contemporary college going and the potential causes of the gap in persistence and degree completion. Using a human capital framework, we review literature regarding policy solutions designed to address this complexity in two broad areas. The first is the availability of financial aid to two-year college students, which may take the form of grants or loans. The second is the two-year college institutional environment, which includes remedial education, student support services, learning communities, and transfer agreements.

Our human capital investment perspective underscores two key areas for policy consideration. First, the idea of students making “investment” decisions when choosing whether or not to enroll or persist in college brings a customer orientation to the issue. The human capital framework highlights how the needs of two-year students differ from those of their four-year peers, indicating that students at the two types of postsecondary institutions will not benefit from the same strategies regarding curriculum, teaching and learning, and student support services. Second, while there is arguably a need for increased funding for financial aid and institutional environment interventions, there is a lack of evidence of their effectiveness. A publicly funded, aggressive research agenda for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions specifically targeted at two-year colleges and their students is therefore a must.

Given their popularity among today’s college students, America’s future economic success may well depend on how we invest in two-year institutions. National leaders would be wise to move the “other college” to the forefront of the postsecondary policymaking arena.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2007.

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