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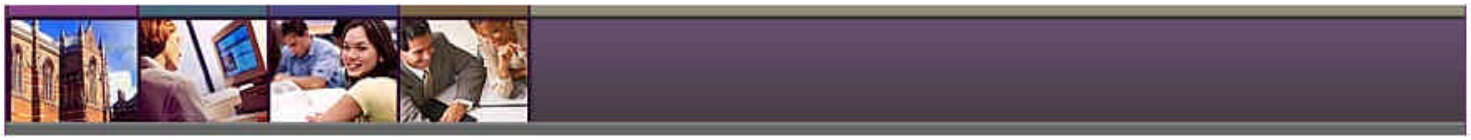

Beyond Transfer Rate: Varieties of Transfer Behavior and Academic Outcomes

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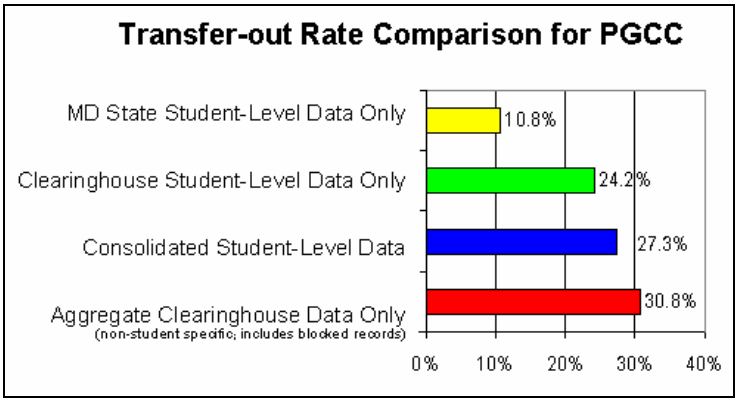
The Clearinghouse's EnrollmentSearch program, with its comprehensive national database, enables participating community colleges to produce far more accurate (and flattering) transfer rate estimates for state and federal accountability reporting. For example, without EnrollmentSearch, Prince George's Community College (PGCC) would be forced to rely on a restrictive state-supplied database that only tracks community college student movement to Maryland public four-year schools, and only when 12 or more credit hours were transferred from the sending college. That would have meant submitting a 1996 full-time, first-time fall entry cohort transfer rate of just 7.3% for a recent IPEDS collection, rather than the 11.3% we were able to report using EnrollmentSearch data.

EnrollmentSearch data, however, is useful for more than producing superior calculations of formal transfer rates. For one thing, accountability-driven estimates of transfer rate are based on artificially narrow definitions of "proper transfer" and often reflect an antiquated understanding of the dynamics underlying contemporary transfer behavior. Results usually fail to reflect the true extent of transfer activity. Only more thorough research can provide a realistic view of the general level of transfer activity.

IPEDS methodology, for instance, uses the "150% of standard time to gradation" rule, based on the increasingly untrue assumption that most full-time attendees complete their two-year school academic objectives within two or three years of beginning post-secondary study. If a full six years (the empirical lifespan of most community college cohorts) is allowed, the calculated transfer rate for PGCC's 1996 fall entry cohort rises from 11.3% to 21.8%.

Furthermore, the IPEDS rate calculation is to be taken only for "degree-seeking" cohort members, the outdated notion being that community college students normally transfer upon graduating. Many recent studies, however, have discovered that most students transferring from community colleges to four-year



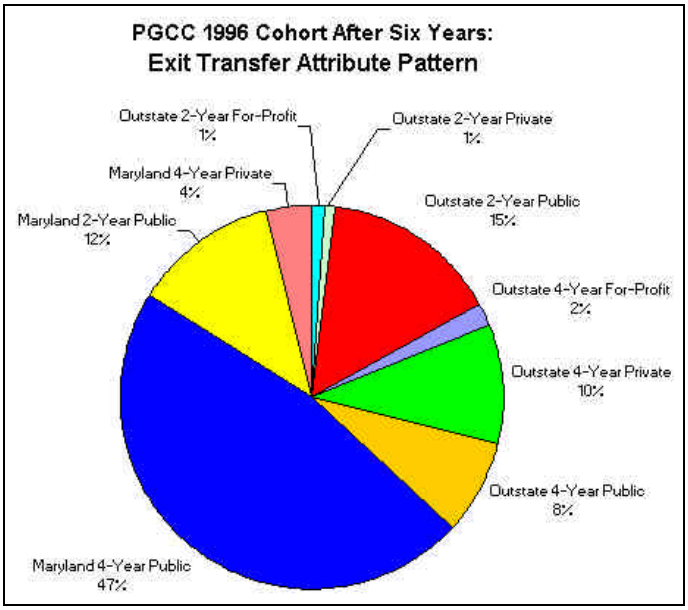
This chart compares the results that PGCC found when it measured the transfer-out rate for its 1996 cohort of first-time freshmen using traditional sources of data and Clearinghouse data.

schools do so without earning associate degrees. In the case of Maryland community colleges, student academic objectives are determined by answers to a registration form. Had PGCC been permitted to base our transfer rate on those with specific transfer intentions in addition to or instead of associate degree attainment, the transfer rate on the IPEDS report for full-time, first-time fall 1996 entrants would have been 17.5% after three years (28.2% by the sixth year).

But there is a more important reason for moving to Clearinghouse data than simply calculating better summary rates. Transfer phenomena at community colleges are richly varied and each type has something significant to reveal in terms of institutional performance, enrollment trends or academic outcomes.

Types of Student Transfer at PGCC

This observation was well reflected in the findings of our most recent transfer study. By the sixth year of Cohort 1996's existence, 26% of the students (full- and part-time) had engaged in some kind of exit transfer behavior. Four out of five transfers occurred within two years of leaving PGCC. Over two-thirds of cohort transfer students earned at least 12 credit hours at PGCC before moving on.



This chart shows the exit transfer attribute pattern of PGCC's 1996 Cohort after six years.

Most transfers were "progressive," going from a community college to a four-year school, but a significant minority turned out to be "lateral," between PGCC and another two-year school.

Lateral transfers pose both an assessment dilemma (since they represent neither dropouts nor academic achievement) and a problem for empirical explanation (Maryland community colleges serve discrete geographical areas and cross-college recruitment is discouraged). Data published by the National Center for Education Statistics suggests that lateral transfer among community colleges is a growing national phenomenon.

PGCC is located in suburban Prince George's County, adjacent to the District of Columbia, and shares its service area with two major four-year schools: the University of Maryland College Park and Bowie State University. Nevertheless, more than 60% of Cohort 1996's transferring students went outside the county

for new schooling, 44% went outside the Metropolitan Washington region. The geographic scope of PGCC transference was quite unexpected.

The majority of in-state progressive transfers were to Maryland public colleges and universities. Out-of-state four-year transfers were split relatively evenly between public and private institutions. This may reflect the influence of the state's community college-public senior institution transfer articulation system. Change of residence may also have been at work here since about half of all non-Maryland transfers were to other community colleges.

The quality of the four-year institutions receiving PGCC's transfer students was unexpected. For example, 69% transferred to senior schools classified as "competitive" to "most competitive" by Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*. (Seventy-one percent of all schools on Barron's list fall into the competitive or better category.) Fifty-one percent transferred to colleges and universities rated at least as very competitive.

Comparing Transfer Attainment and Other Academic Outcomes

Augmenting college graduation data with Clearinghouse data made it possible to develop a much more realistic (and impressive) portrayal of the true extent of student success at PGCC. Thirty percent of Cohort 1996 students received an academic award (e.g., associate degree, occupational certificate), a transfer, or both an award and transfer within six years of starting their studies at PGCC. The largest category of this successful student group transferred to a senior college or university without first earning a degree. Lateral transfer-only students comprised the second largest group. Only one in 10 successful cohort members earned an award before transferring, while 15% were terminal associate degree or certificate earners. Clearly, in its predominance of "pass-through" students, PGCC marches with the national trend.

But having comprehensive transfer data is also a great help for conducting the flip side of academic success research: analyzing student dropout. It prevents untracked transfer students from being included in the sub-cohort of students leaving college without apparent academic achievement. This allows for an accurate assessment of the extent of dropout, and opens up the possibility of properly identifying the causes of negative student outflow.

This "purified" dropout sub-cohort represented 62% of Cohort 1996's total. Negative outflow of this magnitude was not unexpected. What did surprise us were the reasons behind this group's lack of success. When we added dropout timing and course performance, we discovered that 1996 entrants who left PGCC and failed to achieve academically after six years broke roughly down into thirds, each representing a different non-success scenario.

Thirty-six percent dropped out before earning six credit hours (mostly students in remedial programs). Thirty-four percent had poor academic records (GPAs below 2.0). Subsequently, the causes behind the dropout behavior for these two groups were not surprising. However, the remaining 30% were students with adequate pass rates who had made academic progress before dropping out. The firm identification of a significant "successful dropout" population in PGCC's student body (18% of the whole cohort) has major implications for college retention programs.

A Look at the Timing of Transfer Behavior

Lastly, we tried to gain some insight into the timing of transfers and what this tells us about the decision making process of students at various stages in their academic careers. PGCC's institutional research office developed an analytic enrollment management model that classifies students according to how far they got in a sequence of four academic career phases before leaving college:

1. Developmental education
2. "Gateway" credit courses (introductory English and mathematics)
3. General education courses
4. Degree concentration courses

We applied this model to the type and extent of transfer behavior in our study of 1996 entrants.

Cohort 1996's transfer outflow varied systematically through the academic career phases. It was relatively light for students stuck in the developmental phase (16%) and steadily increased before peaking during the last phase, degree concentration, at 51%. A significant level of transfer behavior can be seen in all study phase groups, even among students in remediation programs. In fact, given the large size of this group (over half of all cohort students exited the college from this phase), it turns out that more than a third of all transfers occur during developmental course-taking.

The "type of transfer" also varied across phase groups. Lateral transfers occurred disproportionately during the earlier phases (especially the developmental phase) and four-year transfers during the later stages. This raises the possibility that many students ill-prepared for post-secondary education use transfer to other community colleges as a coping strategy. Students bound for out-of-state senior institutions were most likely to transfer during the two middle phases. Those going onto Maryland public four-year schools usually transferred during the final degree concentration phase. This may reflect the effectiveness of state transfer articulation programs, which are based on heavy credit carry-over and sometimes community college graduation.

Low-credit earning dropouts dominated the developmental phase outflow. Poor-performing dropouts dominated the gateway phase. However, dropouts by good performers, most likely victims of environmental pressures, were significant in all phases. This proved true even during the near-graduation general education and degree concentration phases (31% and 9%, respectively). If PGCC could learn how to effectively support and retain this special needs group, it might materially improve its student success record.

To learn more about EnrollmentSearch, visit **www.studentclearinghouse.org** or contact **service@studentclearinghouse.org**.