



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP & POLICY

IHELP BRIEF

Good News, But a Long Way to Go

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A recent report by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)¹ has garnered attention for its conclusion that educational attainment is increasing at community colleges for all key population groups, a sign that “investments made in a community college education, by individuals and by society as a whole, are paying off.”² The report finds that while enrollment in community colleges grew by 65% over the past two decades, the number of certificates and degrees awarded by those colleges grew approximately twice that much (127%) over the same period. Further, the report emphasizes that the growth in awards to minority students outstripped that for white students.

Any evidence that rates of completion are improving at community colleges is welcome news, given the national priority to increase college completion and build a more competitive work force and economy. Evidence of having narrowed the persistent racial gaps in college enrollment and completion is especially welcome. Table 1 displays the data for the basis of the conclusions drawn by AACC. The table shows that:

- The number of certificates and degrees awarded grew faster than enrollment for white, Black and Hispanic students. (The only exception is for

certificates of more than two years awarded to Hispanic students.)

- Enrollment growth in community colleges was far higher among black students (137%) and Hispanic students (226%) than among white students (17%).
- Growth in the numbers of certificates and degrees awarded was also considerably higher among black and Hispanic students than among white students.

All of this is indeed good news for state leaders and educators who have been working to increase college access and success for broad sectors of the population.

Despite these positive figures, some caution is warranted, for two reasons, in drawing broad conclusions about the “pay off” students and society are achieving or how much the gaps in attainment are narrowing:

1. Much of the growth in awards is from short-term certificates, which may not provide much economic benefit to students³
2. While the growth rates in awards and enrollment were higher among minority students than among white students, the *ratio* of growth in awards to growth in enrollment was much lower for minority students, indicating that rates of success among minority populations have lagged those of white to a significant degree.

Table 1: Growth Rates 1989-90 to 2009-10

	All Students	White	Black	Hispanic
Enrollment	65%	17%	137%	226%
Awards				
Associate Degree	86%	52%	204%	383%
< 1 Year Certificate	459%	440%	776%	1338%
1-2 Year Certificate	121%	88%	197%	302%
>2 Year Certificate	45%	37%	149%	80%

Uncertain Value to Short-term Certificates

Table 1 shows that the highest rate of growth in awards, by far, was in the category of certificates of less than one year (or 30 semester credits), having increased by 459% overall and by substantially more than that among black and Hispanic students. Research indicates that such short-term certificates *alone* are not likely the ticket to a family-sustaining wage. That research finds that:

- certificates of one year or more are consistently linked to increased earnings
- individuals who complete long-term programs of study (certificates or degrees) make significantly more money than those who enroll in these programs but do not complete them
- by contrast, students who complete short-term certificates (less than one year) do not earn much more than those who enroll in such programs but do not complete them.⁴

Short-term certificates could be a first step toward a credential providing real economic benefit, assuming they served to encourage students to continue and complete a longer-term certificate or degree. Alternatively, they could be a sufficient additional credential for adults who already have a college degree or a good-paying job. But it is not apparent - from either the recent research or more generally from institutional accountability data - whether short-term certificates actually serve as building blocks for longer-term ones or as valuable supplements to prior credentials.

Lagging Minority Rates of Improvement

Table 2 shows the ratio of growth in awards to

growth in enrollment over the past two decades. It reveals once again the dominance of short-term certificates, which have grown 27 times faster than enrollment among white students and about six times faster than enrollment among black and Hispanic students. In all categories of awards, the ratio of growth in awards to growth in enrollment is considerably larger for white students than for black and Hispanic students, indicating that the gains minority students are making in completions are well below the gains white students are making, despite the higher percentage growth in awards for minority students.

The AACC’s report contains some good news – enrollment of under-represented minority students has grown tremendously, and the rate of growth in awards exceeds the growth in enrollment for all groups. This progress is worth celebrating, but there is much yet to be done to ensure that (1) the programs colleges are offering and students are completing will give students and society a good return on their investments, and (2) the concerted efforts across the nation’s community colleges to improve the progress and outcomes of minority students will be stepped up to achieve the equitable results the country needs to see.

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¹Mullin, C.M. (2011, October). *The road ahead: A look at trends in the educational attainment of community college students* (Policy Brief 2011-04PBL). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

²Ibid., p. 4

³Bosworth, B. (2010). *Certificates count: An analysis of sub-baccalaureate certificates*. Washington, DC: Complete College America.

⁴Ibid., p. ii

Table 2: Ratio of Growth in Awards to Growth in Enrollment, 1989-90 to 2009-10

	White	Black	Hispanic
Associate: Enrollment	3.1	1.5	1.7
<1 Year Certificate: Enrollment	27.0	5.7	5.9
1-2 Year Certificate: Enrollment	5.2	1.4	1.4
>2 Year Certificate: Enrollment	2.2	1.1	0.35

