



**Sense of Direction —**  
*The Importance of Helping  
Community College Students  
Select and Enter a Program of Study*

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In California and across the country, community colleges are trying to increase the number of students who complete a certificate or degree or transfer to a university. An emerging strategy for using data to improve student outcomes is to monitor the patterns by which students reach and move through intermediate milestones on the pathway to completion, to better understand where student progress stalls and what might be done to promote forward progress.<sup>1</sup> Recent research suggests that an important milestone for students to reach is entering a program of study, defined as completing 9 college-level semester credits in one programmatic area.<sup>2</sup> With few exceptions, students must take 9 units in a single area in order to earn a credential or transfer. Further, students who enter a program of study *quickly* are much more likely to earn a college credential. Entering a program of study provides students with structure and a specific roadmap to follow,<sup>3</sup> and helps them connect to the college in ways that promote completion, such as giving them a community and a distinct program sub-culture that supports their goals.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines the importance of entering a program of study for students in the California Community Colleges (CCC). Researchers studied students' course-taking patterns to identify entry, or non-entry, into a program of study as recently modeled by researchers at the Community College Research Center.<sup>5</sup>

Questions to be answered by the research include:

1. What share of incoming students reach the milestone of entering a program of study and does that share vary across student subgroups?
2. Does the timing of program entry make a difference in the likelihood that a student will complete a certificate, degree, or transfer?
3. Do students who do not enter a program of study intend to do so and fail, or do their goals not include earning a college credential?

**Share Entering a Program of Study  
("Concentrators")**

Of the more than 430,000 incoming CCC students studied, only 60% *attempted* to enter a program of study, meaning they enrolled in 9 credits in a single programmatic area, and only 49% *succeeded* in entering a program of study by completing the credits.<sup>6</sup> As shown in Figure 1, the share of students who attempted to enter a program was about the same for each racial/ethnic group but a smaller share of Latino and black students succeeded in entering a program. Older students were less likely than younger students to attempt to enter a program and to succeed in doing so. Students who attended full-time in the first term were far more likely to attempt to enter a program.

**Data:** Unit record data from the CCC Chancellor's Office for the entering cohort of first-time CCC students who enrolled in credit courses in the 2004-05 academic year, tracked over a six-year period through 2009-10.

**Defining "Program of Study":** 9 college-level credits in a single programmatic area, using a taxonomy of 3 liberal arts programs and 18 career technical programs.

# IHELP BRIEF

The number of students in just one entering cohort who attempted to enter a program but failed to do so exceeded 50,000, suggesting that there is a large number of students, from multiple entering cohorts, enrolled in the CCC at any one time who are interested in, but having difficulty, reaching this important milestone.

## Timing of Entering a Program of Study

The earlier students enter a program, the more likely they are to complete a certificate, degree, or transfer. Figure 2 shows that students who entered a program in the first year were nearly *twice as likely* to complete a certificate, degree or transfer as students who entered a program after the first year. First-year

concentrators were nearly 50% more likely to complete than those who entered a program in the second year, and the rates of completion fell sharply for students entering a program later than the second year.

About 11% of successful concentrators were still enrolled after six years. This suggests that program concentrators could see even higher rates of completion if programs had well-structured pathways and colleges could ensure sufficient course offerings for students to complete those pathways. Among those who attempted but did not enter a program of study, a few earned a certificate and some transferred to a university,<sup>7</sup> but the overall completion rate was only about 8%.

Figure 1  
Share of Students Attempting and Entering a Program of Study within 6 Years

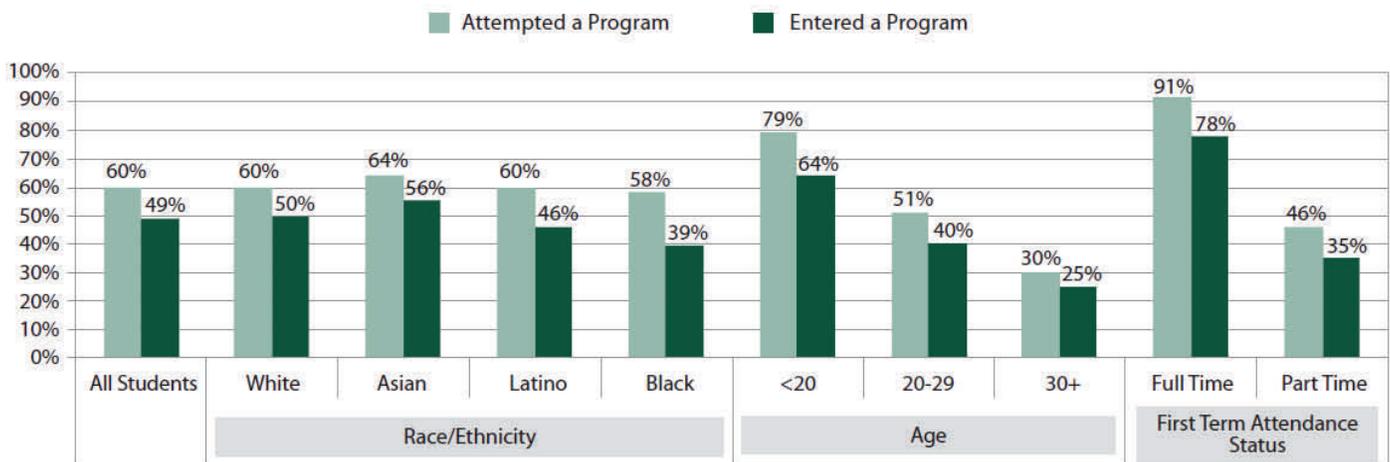
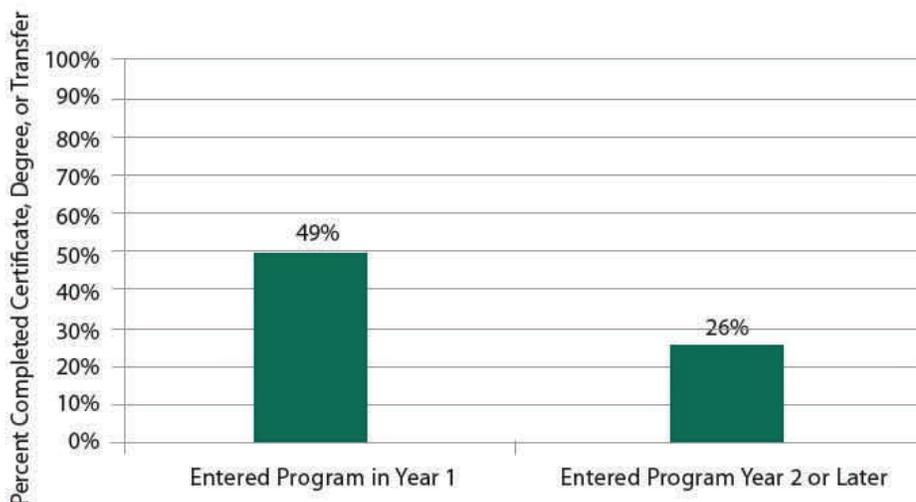


Figure 2  
Completion Rate Nearly Twice as High Among Students Who Entered a Program in Year 1



The majority of CCC students enter college academically unprepared, although the cohort data do not include information on students' assessment test results or any other indicators of academic preparation level. But using information on the number of developmental, or "basic skills" courses taken, researchers found that early program entry was associated with a higher completion rate for all students, regardless of the number of basic skills courses in which they enrolled (Figure 3). This shows that assisting students to identify and enter a program of study early is an important strategy for colleges to undertake not just for college-ready students but also for students who are striving to become college-ready.

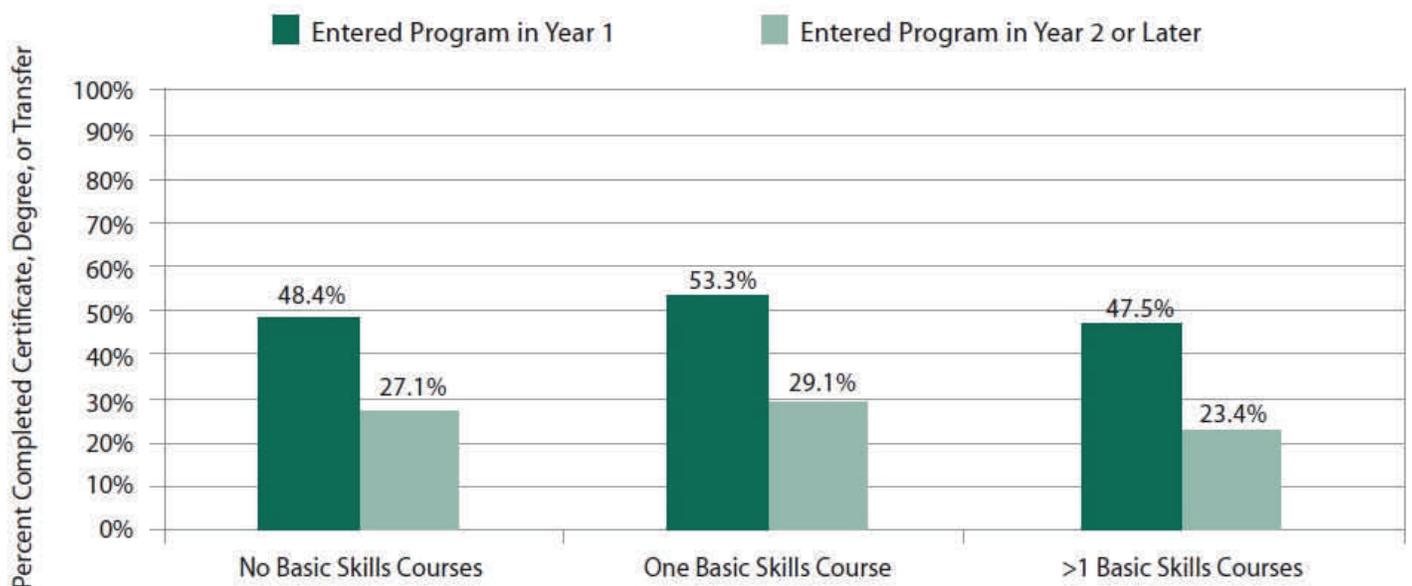
### Intentions of Students who Did Not Enter Programs (Non-concentrators)

More than half (51%) of entering students never successfully entered a program of study. In view of the documented value of reaching this milestone, it is important to understand the extent to which these non-concentrators may have intended to enter a program, i.e., to pursue a college credential, so that they may be helped to do so.

As shown in Figure 1, many non-concentrators (11% of the total entering cohort) did attempt to enter a program. But what about the 40 percent who did not attempt to enter a program (i.e., they did not enroll in three courses in a programmatic area)? Some likely never intended to enter a program of study, having enrolled to take courses to improve their job skills or basic skills or for their own personal interest.

But the data suggest that a substantial number of non-concentrators likely intended to pursue a college credential but dropped out before making enough progress to enter a program. One third of non-concentrators listed a goal of completing a college credential on their initial application. In addition, non-concentrators completed just over 40% of the credits in which they enrolled (compared to 74% among program concentrators). This is a strong indication that many struggled to meet their educational goals. Had they completed their courses at comparable rates, one might conclude that they simply wanted a set of courses that did not constitute a program.

Figure 3  
Early Program Entry Associated with Higher Completion Rate,  
Regardless of Number of Developmental Courses Attempted



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Helping students choose, enter (especially within their first year of enrollment) and complete well-defined and structured programs could help tens of thousands more students in each entering cohort to earn certificates, degrees, and transfer. With fewer than half of entering students (only 39% of black students) entering a program of study, the numbers who can ultimately earn a credential or transfer is severely constrained.

It is well known that community college students face many barriers to success. But the findings of this research suggest that the colleges will be more successful with their students if the access mission of the colleges is re-conceived as providing access to *well-structured programs* rather than to a collection of courses that may not add up to a coherent program of study. Specific steps the colleges could take to increase the numbers of students who successfully enter programs of study in their first year include:

- Help incoming students learn about and choose programs of study through orientation or a required first-term course that, along with general college success skills, introduces students to the programs offered at the college;
- Ensure that certificate and degree programs are well structured and provide roadmaps of course sequences for each program of study so that students know what courses they should take in their first year of pursuing a program;
- Develop class schedules to ensure availability of courses based on students' declared programs;
- Ensure that certificate and degree programs are well structured for part-time students, given that they make up a substantial majority of entering students (even as efforts are made to increase the proportion of students who are able to attend full-time);
- Provide better professional development opportunities for academic advising staff, to ensure they can provide guidance for incoming students on the full range of program options at the colleges, including career technical programs; and
- Require students to declare a major program of study after a certain amount of time or accumulated credits and assign faculty advisors to students in their declared major programs.

*This brief is excerpted from the full IHELP report "Sense of Direction – The Importance of Helping Community College Students Select and Enter a Program of Study." Visit [www.csus.edu/ihelp](http://www.csus.edu/ihelp) for the full report.*

1. Offenstein, J. & Shulock, N. (2010). *Taking the next step: The promise of intermediate measures for meeting postsecondary completion goals*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future; Leinbach, D.T. & Jenkins, D. (2008). *Using longitudinal data to increase community college student success: A guide to measuring milestone and momentum point attainment*. New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
2. Jenkins, D. (2011). *Get with the program: Accelerating community college students' entry into and completion of programs of study*. New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
3. Scott-Clayton, J. (2011). *The shapeless river: Does a lack of structure inhibit students' progress at community colleges?* New York: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
4. Nitecki, E. M. (2011). The power of the program: How the academic program can improve community college student success. *Community College Review*, 39(2), 98-120.
5. Jenkins, 2011
6. Excluding entering students who already possessed an associate or bachelor's degree from the analyses did not make any substantial difference in the findings – when those students were excluded, 63% of entering students attempted to enter a program and 51% actually did. Given the minimal impact on the results, and the understanding that many people with degrees enroll in the CCC to re-train for a career change, we present the findings for the total cohort.
7. Students who transferred without entering a program of study would have had to transfer to institutions other than to a California public university well short of completing general education because any three courses in one of three areas of the liberal arts and sciences would count as having entered a program of study.

