

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

Emerging Benchmarks & Student Success
Trends From Across The Civitas

VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 4 | SPRING 2018



FOREWORD

It's common knowledge that too many students leave their college or university without a degree. Less than 60 percent of first-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree actually graduate in six years. Only about 30 percent of students at community colleges earn their associate degrees within three years. That means many students are ending their higher education journey without tangible evidence of their successes. It also means many are leaving with debt, but without the benefits of future earnings that usually justify taking out loans.

Nearly all higher education institutions have started to incorporate practices to stem this outward flow of non-graduates. First-year seminars, bridge programs, and a host of useful interventions are designed to help boost the persistence rates of students who are just beginning their degree quest. These initiatives should not be discounted, but—particularly in a time of limited resources—it is critical to focus interventions strategically. That means also looking at interventions for students who are near to completion.

New research featured in this issue of Community Insights indicates that a large percentage of students are persisting well-past their first year, only to leave before graduation. Nearly one in five students who do not persist complete 75 percent or more of the credits needed for a typical degree. The research presented here offers a better understanding of this phenomenon, and it represents an important step forward in finding strategies to support these near-completers.

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COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

Welcome to the fourth issue of the Civitas Learning *Community Insights Report*. With these reports our intention is to illuminate unique insights and emerging trends from across our partner community, while highlighting examples of how institutions are acting on them to improve their students' success.

In our previous report, we focused on better understanding how to best support part-time students, many of whom tend to be nontraditional or post-traditional students. They are a population that's growing in size and importance across higher education, and yet remained all but invisible in some graduation rate calculations and pathway formulations. Until last year, even the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) did not track the graduation rates of these students.

Our findings challenged institutions to take a more nuanced view of their success strategies for part-time students—especially popular 15-to-Finish campaigns—and offered new time-to-degree solutions, such as encouraging students who were ready to take just one more course each semester. Institutions took note of our findings and are beginning to identify ways to nudge students who are ready to take one more course. For example, in a targeted campaign at Harper College, “one-more” outreach inspired by our last report helped the institution increase the percentage of students taking seven or more credit hours per semester, with nearly 200 students better optimizing their course loads to accelerate their academic progression.

For this report, we turn our attention to another often overlooked student population: those who have earned a significant amount of credits, but for one reason or another, are at risk of leaving their current institution without earning a degree.

Historically, and for good reason, many institutions focus retention efforts on students' first year of college. Institutions devote precious few resources to students who are already close to graduation. After all, it's easy to assume that students who have completed 75 percent or more of the credit threshold are on track to persist to completion. As it turns out, a significant number of these students are not graduating. **In this new analysis, we find that, on average, nearly one in five students who do not persist complete 75 percent or more of the credit threshold for a degree before leaving the institution.**

Finding ways to help these near-completers cross the finish line is an important and achievable goal for institutions focused on near-term completion outcomes. This is important not only for first-time students at the near-completion threshold, but also returning students, the majority of whom—despite going back to college with credit hours to their name—still do not graduate within six years.

The issue is, of course, complicated by a number of factors. Among them are the complexities and yet unanswered questions surrounding the persistence of transfer students. While 37 percent of all students end up transferring¹, the federal government—like with part-time students—only began collecting graduation data on transfer students last year. According to the Community College Research Center at TC at Columbia, only 42 percent of community college students who transfer go on to earn a Bachelor's degree. While over 80 percent of students entering community college intend to transfer to a four-year institution, just one-third actually do.

Less than half of those students complete their degree.

For many in education, “successful transfer” is defined as meeting the bureaucratic hurdles of technically moving a student’s enrollment from one institution to the next. Indeed, some institutions report these students as successes on scorecards. However, CCRC’s data suggest we should challenge that assumption. Perhaps we should reserve the phrase “successful transfer” for those that arrive in their new institution with their credits accepted and applied to targeted degree programs (i.e., little-to-no credit loss) and who are able to successfully navigate toward a desired degree. Clearly, all transfers are not created equal.

Another complexity to consider is the extent to which the educational degree plan—pathways as they’re often called in the community college sector—are coherent, clear, and communicated. Are our students getting on these pathways and maintaining strong degree-program alignment along the way? One of the key challenges near-completers may face is the harsh reality that they have accumulated significant credits—and used significant amounts of financial aid—only to remain seriously off-plan. Faced with having to make up far too many courses lost in transfer and adding additional years to their journey after yet another major change, some students may lose hope. Others just run out of money and time.

¹The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

All of this takes place against a backdrop of varying differential tuition policies, many of which include charging students more money for higher-level courses. While frequently designed to increase access to, or the attractiveness of, a program by offering lower prices for entry-level courses, such policies can actually increase a student's financial burden as they approach graduation. Differential tuition policies are effective at some institutions as an initial enrollment strategy, but research has shown² that such policies can lead to students facing unexpected costs, negatively impacting first-generation and low-income students in particular.

This report is designed to shine a light on what we know about the journeys of near-completers and how some universities and colleges are already tackling the challenge of helping them focus on the finish. The findings are based on data from a subset of our partner institutions: 53 institutions (30 community colleges and 23 four-year universities) representing more than 300,000 degree-seeking students.

Because students who have earned a significant number of credits are likely to persist and graduate, there has historically been little focus on ensuring these students actually get across the finish line. Too many students persist for so long, only to still not earn a degree. Focusing on providing targeted, intensive support to these students can create significant near-term wins on completion. The analysis in this report provides a detailed view of just how prevalent the opportunity is, as well as what some institutions are doing to address it.

²American Educational Research Association



What the Data are Saying:
Nearly 1 in 5 students who do not graduate have 75 percent or more of the credit threshold.

When analyzing the data, we focused on students who had earned enough credits to be near completion but, for whatever reason, do not persist and finish their degree. For four-year institutions, we defined this group as students who earned 75 percent or more of the credits required by a 120 or 180-hour Bachelor's degree. For two-year institutions, the group was defined as students who earned 75 percent or more of the credits required for a 60 or 90-hour Associate's degree.

We found that, on average, almost one in five students who do not graduate have 75 percent or more of the credit threshold complete. One in 10 students who do not persist reach the 90 percent or more threshold.

As represented in Table 1 and 2, the historical average percent of non-persisting students who had completed 75 percent or more of the credit threshold was 18 percent. At the institutions included in our analysis, there are currently 119,969 enrolled students who are at or over the 75-percent threshold. This means there are about 21,162 near-completers in our analysis alone who could be impacted by institutions finding ways to support and nudge them toward completing their degree.

The historical average percent of non-persisting students who had completed 90 percent or more of the credit threshold was 11 percent. At the institutions included in our analysis, there are currently 79,357 enrolled students who are at or over the 90 percent threshold. More than 9,000 students at these institutions could be impacted by the right kind of nudges or enhanced services.

Our analysis included 23 four-year institutions and 30 two-year institutions. At four-year institutions, specifically, about 13 percent of non-persisting students had completed 75 percent or more of credit threshold, and about 6 percent had reached the 90 percent credit threshold. But at two-

year institutions, nearly 22 percent were at or over the 75 percent threshold and more than 15 percent were at or over the 90 percent threshold.

Institution Type	Percent of Non-Persisters at 75%+ of Credit Threshold
Overall (53)	18%
Two Year (31)	22%
Four-Year Non-Research (11)	9%
Four-Year Research (12)	13%
Online (8)	15%
On-ground (47)	18%

Table 1: Historical average of non-persisting students who completed 75 percent or more of credit threshold, according to institution type.

Institution Type	Percent of Non-Persisters at 90%+ of Credit Threshold
Overall (53)	11%
Two Year (31)	16%
Four-Year Non-Research (11)	4%
Four-Year Research (12)	7%
Online (8)	9%
On-ground (47)	12%

Table 2: Historical average of non-persisting students who completed 90 percent or more of credit threshold, according to institution type.

In addition, eight of the institutions included in this analysis enroll 20 percent or more of their undergraduates in entirely online courses. While online students near completion showed a historically higher average percent of non-persisting students than the overall population, the rate of non-persisting students over the 75 percent threshold was lower, at about 14 percent, compared to the 18 percent rate



for students taking courses in person or students taking a mix of online, in-person, or blended courses. Similarly, the historical average of non-persisting online students who had reached the 90 percent credit threshold was 8 percent, compared to 12 percent of students taking courses in person or taking a mix of online, in-person, or blended courses.

Finally, at the 14 Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) included in our analysis, we saw a slightly higher percent of non-persisting students near the finish line. The historical average rate of non-persisting students at HSIs who had completed 75 percent or more of the credit threshold was 19 percent, while non-HSIs had a rate of 17 percent.

Partner Tip: Finding Your Near-Completers

Step 1: Use the filters in Illume to isolate your base student population. This is your degree-seeking population. This will likely require filtering for undergraduate, Bachelor's, FTIC and Transfer students, but the filters you apply may vary based on your configuration of Illume.

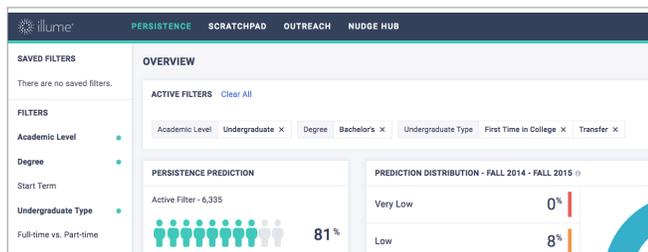


Figure 1: Applying Filters in Illume

Step 2: Locate the “Institutional Credits Earned (Cumulative) Powerful Predictor” and click it to view the “Powerful Predictor Chart.”

Rank	Predictor Name	MOM (ALL)	MOM (DATA ONLY)	Mutual Info	Data %
51	On-Ground Institutional Credits Earned Ratio (Prior Term)	0.742	0.764	0.575	66.78
61	Avg On-Ground Institutional Credits Earned Per Term (Cumulative)	0.746	0.778	0.600	83.52
70	Institutional Credits Earned (Cumulative)	0.765	0.806	0.613	83.52

Figure 2: Locating Institutional Credits Earned within Powerful Predictors

Step 3: Determine the number of credits needed to be 75 percent complete with a degree at your college or university. Typically, for Bachelor's degrees, 90 credits is 75 percent of a 120 credit hour degree. For most institutions, 45 credits is 75 percent of an Associate's degree. Highlight the “Powerful Predictor Chart” from the 75 percent credit threshold and higher.

Note the percent of non-persisters (12.66 percent in the below image). This is the percent of non-persisting students from the historical sample that had earned 75 percent or more of the institutional credits needed for a degree.



Figure 3: Determining Credit Thresholds and Persisters/Non-Persisters

Step 4: Click “View Active Students” to navigate to a list of students who have earned 75 percent or more of the credits needed for a degree. Note the total number of active students over the 75 percent threshold. Sort by Persistence Prediction to find the students who are least likely to persist. This list can be used to differentiate support for near-completers based on persistence risk indicated by Persistence Prediction.

Student ID	First Name	Last Name	Email	Enrolled Current Term	Persistence Prediction	Last Enrolled Term	Next Enrolled Term	Institutional Credits Earned (Cumulative)
ex9b26c1622459e91c53a322525	Philip	Saechao	philip.saechao@example.edu	Yes	Low	Spring 2018	-	97
ex7af8ac547bba2faa9d27a25114	Earl	Yu	earl.yu@example.edu	Yes	Low	Spring 2018	-	142
exa9df358759c78a1708db45cdf	Johnny	Mickel	johnny.mickel@example.edu	Yes	Low	Spring 2018	-	110
ex66cb640ca0388db85fc988b4	Maria	Warrington	maria.warrington@example.edu	Yes	Moderate	Spring 2018	-	96

Figure 4: Identifying Students for Data-Inspired Outreach



Benchmarking the Civitas

To summarize, this benchmark is based on data across 53 institutions comprised of 30 two-year institutions and 23 four-year institutions.

- Across all institutions, on average, we found that nearly one in five students who do not graduate have 75 percent or more of the credit threshold complete. One in 10 non-persisting students have reached the 90 percent or more threshold.
- At four-year institutions, about 13 percent of non-persisting students had completed 75 percent or more of credit threshold, and about 6 percent had reached the 90 percent credit threshold.
- At two-year institutions, nearly 22 percent of students who did not earn a degree were at or over the 75 percent threshold and more than 15 percent were at or over the 90 percent threshold.

Why It Matters

More than 30 million people in the United States have some college credit but no credential. Worse yet, research suggests about a quarter of Americans with student loan debt from college do not have a degree, and, according to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of households headed by adults under the age of 40 who have only some college credit owe student debt. The vast majority – more than 60 percent, according to some estimates – of borrowers who default on their student loans did not graduate.

That so many students are leaving college in debt but without a degree is troubling enough, yet the problem also poses a potential crisis to the larger workforce and economy. Lumina Foundation predicts that the United States will require 16.4 million more credentialed learners by 2025 in order to keep pace with workforce demands. Of those, the foundation anticipates that more than one-third will have to be near-completers who return to college to earn their degree.

In our analysis, the historical average for non-persisting students who were near completion at community colleges was greater than 20 percent, perhaps reinforcing the importance of direct pathways and the value of completing a degree at an institution prior to transferring to another. Two-thirds of community college students who transfer to four-year institutions do not earn an associate degree prior to transferring, despite research showing how critical it is to do so. According to findings from the Community College Research Center, those who do transfer after first earning an associate degree are 49 percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree in four years and 22 percent more likely to in six years.

Given the significant numbers of Americans with some college and no credential, several states and institutions have launched campaigns to encourage these once-students to return to college and complete their education. From institutions in Tennessee providing returning adults with specific mentorship and counseling to legislation in Idaho promising greater scholarship funds to these learners, state and education leaders are increasingly focused on helping many near-completers get back in the race and cross the finish line.

While efforts to attract and retain returning learners should and must continue, colleges and universities can do more to prevent many of these students from leaving without a credential in the first place. By focusing on the one in five non-persisting students who complete 75 percent or more of the credit threshold for a degree and the one in 10 non-persisting students who complete 90 percent or more of the credit threshold, institutions can take a preemptive and targeted approach to ensuring more students cross the finish line and unlock their full earnings potential.

Returning students can also benefit from this focus. Just one-third of students who return to college go on to graduate in six to eight years³, a rate that is 27 percent lower than first-time students. As with students still enrolled, steps should be taken to identify and nudge these returning students toward graduation.

³ University Professional and Continuing Education Association, the American Council on Education, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Inside Track



Among our partner institutions, several trends have emerged as promising solutions to support near-completers. Institutions have seen success by identifying specific student segments, such as those who have completed 75 percent or more of the credit threshold for a degree. Institutions have used this insight found in Illume, combined with a prediction of likelihood to persist, to support students with stratified outreach strategies.

The prediction score for each student leverages many variables including a student's full-time status, age, academic performance, number of credit hours attempted per term, and even consistency of activity on an institution's learning management system. Using the scores from their predictive models, institutions have designed targeted initiatives to reach out directly to students and offer counseling, career advice, mentorship, and more.

For students with higher persistence predictors, small moves have led to big gains. Often something as simple as an email reminding students of graduation requirements and upcoming deadlines was enough of a nudge to drive student success outcomes.

Partner Insight: Del Mar College

Del Mar College is a two-year institution in Corpus Christi, Texas, that supports a diverse and typically underserved population, including Hispanic students, adult learners, and non-residential students. In 2017, the college set a goal to increase its number of graduation applications by five percent over the previous spring semester. Del Mar soared past its original goal of increasing graduation applications by 5 percent with a 26 percent increase, and additionally, they increased their graduation rate by more than 30 percent.

As with this study, Del Mar focused on students who were 75 percent or more complete toward a degree or certificate.

Administrators worked with the Civitas Learning platform and its app, Illume, to identify students and tailor their outreach based on prediction score groupings from very low

to very high. Students with high persistence predictions were sent personalized emails reminding them of degree requirements and upcoming deadlines, and those with middle to low persistence predictions received phone calls from graduation coaches inviting them to a face-to-face meeting. In one case, leaders of the program examined the course history of a student and found that he already qualified for an associate degree—and an additional credential.

The initiative included simple nudges like emails and phone calls, but also workshops, financial literacy, tutoring, and career coaching. While overall student success strategy was precise, it was not complicated—revealing just how small moves can result in big gains.

Partner Insight: University of Texas at Arlington

The University of Texas at Arlington is a four-year research institution that offers the largest nursing program in the state of Texas. In April 2017, the Office of Enrollment and Student Services at UT-Arlington's College of Nursing and Health Innovation organized an outreach campaign targeted at 294 nursing students who had already received an associate degree prior to enrolling in the college's bachelor's program but had yet to graduate with a four-year degree.

The students were all within one or two credits of earning their degree, and they were identified in Illume as having high persistence predictions.

The campaign was designed around simple but targeted email nudges. Featuring the subject line "Light at the End of the Tunnel," the emails contained information about how to register for graduation or enroll in the upcoming summer term. In the end, all but one of the 294 students either graduated or enrolled for the summer, which was significantly higher than previous outreach campaigns. University officials also reported that the campaign led to dramatic time savings for advisors. The proactive emails eliminated many administrative challenges that advisors and staff historically faced.



FOCUS ON THE FINISH

Conclusion

This report is intended to help inspire a broader conversation about persistence and retention efforts by showcasing just how close many students who leave without a degree are to graduating. Finding and leveraging the right kind of strategic supports and targeted nudges for these near-completers can have an important impact on our students and our economy.

We offer the following to consider:

- **Close Isn't Complete**
In our analysis of these institutions, we found that, on average, one in five students who do not graduate have completed 75 percent or more of the credit threshold. One in 10 non-persisting students reach the 90 percent or more threshold. This represents significant sunk costs in terms of time and money for the students and the institution; moreover, the majority of these students are in good academic standing and much closer to the ultimate goal. Put simply, while there are big moves that improve our work at the starting gate, there are smaller moves that could significantly improve graduation rates by turning some focus to the finish line.
- **Precise Outreach Works**
For many students, something as simple as a well-timed email or a phone call can be the difference between graduating and leaving without a degree. Not all students will respond to the same type of outreach, however. Some students may just need a reminder of an upcoming deadline, other students may require counseling, coaching, and other more involved efforts. When student outreach is tailored and timely—and anchored in institution-specific data and intelligence—colleges and universities are able to move the needle on student outcomes.

About the Report

Community Insights is an on-going, research-based project with reports based on collective data from across the Civitas Learning customer base. This particular study considered more than 300,000 students who had reached the 75 percent credit threshold or higher toward a degree. The data was analyzed using Civitas Learning's Student Success Intelligence Platform, our tailored data science, and Illume.

Exploratory Analysis Methodology

The findings in this study are based on data from a subset of our partner institutions.

53 institutions were considered, representing 30 community colleges and 23 4-year institutions. Twelve were research (R1, R2, R3) institutions. 8 institutions had a significant online student population (> 20 percent). For these institutions, the populations were split into two groups for analysis—students taking on-ground, blended, or a mix of on-ground and online courses, and students taking only online courses—to look at the findings independently. Thirty five were access institutions and 18 were selective. Three institutions served a large number of associate's and bachelor's degree seeking students. For these institutions, the populations were split into two groups for analysis. Finally, high school dual-enrollment students were also excluded.

For additional questions regarding the study or how we segment, cluster, and create predictive models, please email communityinsights@civitaslearning.com.

ABOUT OUR PROCESS

Better Intelligence Through Unique Predictive Models.

We ingest institutional data from disparate silos, unify the information, and derive meaningful features. Ninety-five percent of the predictive power in our Student Success Intelligence Platform comes from derived features that inform more than 2,000 predictive models, which are surfaced to support timely decision-making for advisors, faculty, administrators and students.

Our platform was built to learn. It leverages data from across the institution to find and distribute the strongest signals on the student lifecycle. It powers continuous learning from decisions made, actions taken, and outcomes achieved.

ABOUT CIVITAS LEARNING

Civitas Learning is a student success company delivering the clearest path to improved higher education outcomes. The company's Student Success Intelligence Platform leverages each institution's unique data to find and distribute the strongest signals across the student lifecycle. These signals empower students to make the best possible decisions along their academic pathway. Advisors, faculty, and administrators can personalize support, scale meaningful action, and measure impact to dramatically improve student outcomes.

Today, Civitas Learning is a strategic partner to more than 350 colleges and universities, serving more than 8 million students. Together with our growing community of partners, Civitas Learning is making the most of the world's learning data to graduate a million more students per year by 2025.

Previous issues of our Community Insights Report can be accessed at:

<http://go.civitaslearning.com/community-insights>



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