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Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later

Statistical Analysis Report

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report describes the enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment of students who began postsecondary education for the first time in the 1995–96 academic year. It covers the experiences of these first-time beginners over a period of 6 academic years, from 1995–96 to 2000–01, and provides information about the rates at which students attained degrees, transferred to other institutions, and left postsecondary education without attaining degrees.

The report is based on the 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01), a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey that provides data describing a nationally representative sample of first-time students who entered postsecondary education during the 1995–96 academic year. The students were initially interviewed in 1996, at the end of their first year in postsecondary education; interviewed again in 1998, 3 years after they had started; and interviewed for the last time in 2001, 6 years after they had started.

Types of Institutions Attended

When they first entered postsecondary education in 1995–96, the largest proportion of beginning students (46 percent) enrolled at public 2-year institutions (community colleges). About one-fourth (26 percent) started at public 4-year institutions, 15 percent at private not-for-profit 4-year institutions, 10 percent at private for-profit

institutions offering vocational programs of less than 4 years, and 3 percent at all other types of institutions.

However, over the 6 years covered in this report, 40 percent of students who began in 1995–96 were also enrolled in at least one postsecondary institution other than the institution at which they started. About one-third (32 percent) of the beginners transferred from their first institution to a different one, and 11 percent were sometimes coenrolled, taking courses at more than one institution at the same time. About one-fourth of the students who began at 4-year institutions and 42 percent of those who began at public 2-year institutions transferred during the 6 years.

Degree Completion Among Students Beginning at Public 2-Year Institutions

Public 2-year institutions serve a diverse body of students who enroll with a variety of educational goals. Associate's degree completion rates are only partially valid as a measure of student success at public 2-year institutions, because it is not necessary to complete an associate's degree before transferring to a 4-year institution. During their first year, about one-half of the beginning students at public 2-year colleges said that they intended to attain an associate's degree, and another one-fourth intended to transfer to a 4-year institution and complete a bachelor's degree. In the following years, about

one-fourth of the beginners at public 2-year institutions did transfer to a 4-year institution.

Of the three-fourths of beginners at public 2-year institutions who intended to complete either an associate's or a bachelor's degree, 31 percent did so within 6 years: 23 percent completed an associate's degree, and 13 percent completed a bachelor's degree (these percentages include the 5 percent who completed both). Among those students who actually did transfer to a 4-year institution, 36 percent attained a bachelor's degree within 6 years of starting community college.

Types of Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates for Students Beginning at 4-Year Institutions

Rates of completion at the first institution attended versus at any 4-year institution

When 4-year colleges and universities report their graduation rates, they are reporting the percentage of first-time freshmen who completed a bachelor's degree at that institution within a certain time period. Institutions usually do not know what happened to the students who left without a degree. When students leave an institution, they may either leave postsecondary education permanently or transfer somewhere else. From the institutional perspective, all students who leave before completing a degree at that institution are considered to be dropouts. From the perspectives of students as well as of the postsecondary education system as a whole, transfers are not dropouts: they are persisting students who have decided to attend a different institution. In this report, the term *institutional completion rate* is used to describe bachelor's degree attainment of students at the first institution they attended, and the term *student*

completion rate is used to describe bachelor's degree attainment anywhere, regardless of whether or not students stayed at the original institution.

Among all beginners at 4-year institutions in 1995–96, 51 percent completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years at the first institution attended (table A). However, when those who transferred out of the first institution are also included, the percentage of beginners who actually completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years (at any 4-year institution) increases to 58 percent.

Rates based on different subcategories of students

Bachelor's degree completion rates not only differ by whether they reflect the institutional or student perspective, but also by which subcategories of beginning students are included when calculating the rates (table A). For example, if the calculation includes only those beginners with a bachelor's degree goal (90 percent of all beginners at 4-year institutions), then the rate of completion at the first 4-year institution attended was 55 percent. Including only first-time beginners who were enrolled full time when they started and also had a bachelor's degree goal (83 percent of all beginners), the bachelor's degree completion rate at the first 4-year institution was 58 percent.

Sometimes interest centers on recent high school graduates (those who started college immediately after high school, who made up 83 percent of the beginners at 4-year institutions). Among all the beginners at 4-year institutions who were recent high school graduates, the rate of bachelor's degree completion at the first institution was 55 percent, while it was 64

Table A.—Percentage of students beginning at 4-year institutions in 1995–96 who had completed a bachelor’s degree at the first institution attended or at any 4-year institution by June 2001, by subcategories of beginning students

	Percent of total	Bachelor’s degree completion rates after 6 years	
		Institutional completion rate at first 4-year institution	Student completion rate at any 4-year institution
Total beginners at 4-year institutions	100.0	50.7	58.2
Subcategories of beginners			
Enrolled full time first year	90.4	54.1	62.0
Had a bachelor’s degree goal	90.3	55.3	62.7
Had a bachelor’s degree goal and enrolled full time first year	82.9	58.0	65.6
Recent high school graduates (did not delay entry)			
Recent high school graduates with a bachelor’s degree goal	83.2	55.1	63.7
Recent high school graduates with a bachelor’s degree goal and enrolled full time first year	76.5	59.2	67.4
	73.0	60.6	68.8

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01).

percent at any 4-year institution. But including only those first-time beginners who were recent high school graduates, had a bachelor’s degree goal, and also started as full-time students (73 percent of all beginners at 4-year institutions), the 6-year completion rate at the first institution attended was 61 percent, and it was 69 percent at any 4-year institution.

Focus on Students With a Bachelor’s Degree Goal at 4-Year Institutions

This section describes only the beginners at 4-year institutions who had a bachelor’s degree goal (90 percent of the total), including those who started as part-time students and those who did not start college immediately after finishing high school.

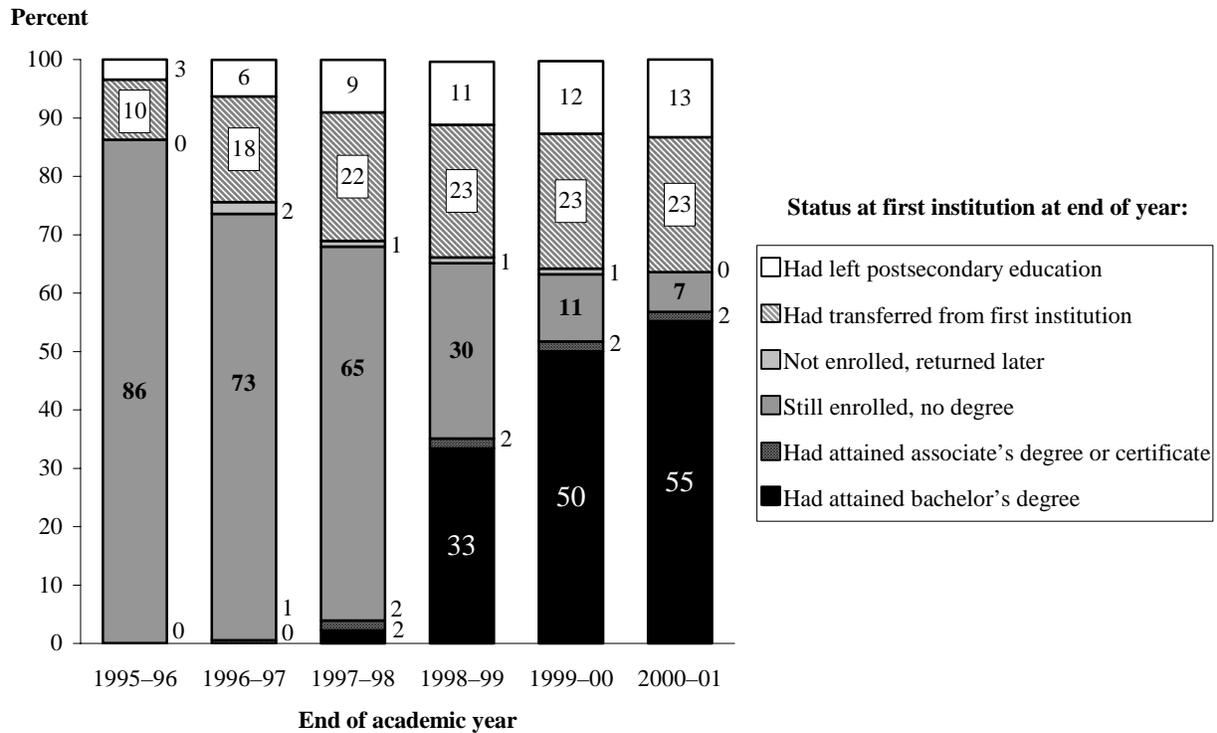
Degree completion and transfer from the first institution attended

Among students beginning at 4-year institutions with a bachelor’s degree goal, the

cumulative percentage who had left their first institution and transferred to a different one was 10 percent by the end of the first year, 18 percent by the end of the second year (including the 10 percent who had already left by the end of the first year), 22 percent by the end of the third year, and then about 23 percent through the end of the sixth year (since there were few additional transfers in the fifth and sixth years) (figure A).

The cumulative percentage of beginning students who were not enrolled at the first institution at the end of the academic year and never enrolled anywhere else by June 2001 was 3 percent at the end of the first year, 6 percent at the end of the second year (including the 3 percent who were not enrolled at the end of the first year), 9 percent at the end of the third year, and so on. By June 2001, at the end of the sixth academic year, 13 percent had left postsecondary education directly from the first institution without a degree, a smaller percentage than the 23 percent who had transferred elsewhere.

Figure A.—Percentage distribution of students with a bachelor’s degree goal who were first-time beginners at a 4-year institution in 1995–96, by their enrollment status or degree attainment at the first institution attended, at the end of each academic year through 2000–01



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Students who transferred after attaining a degree are only included in the attainment categories.

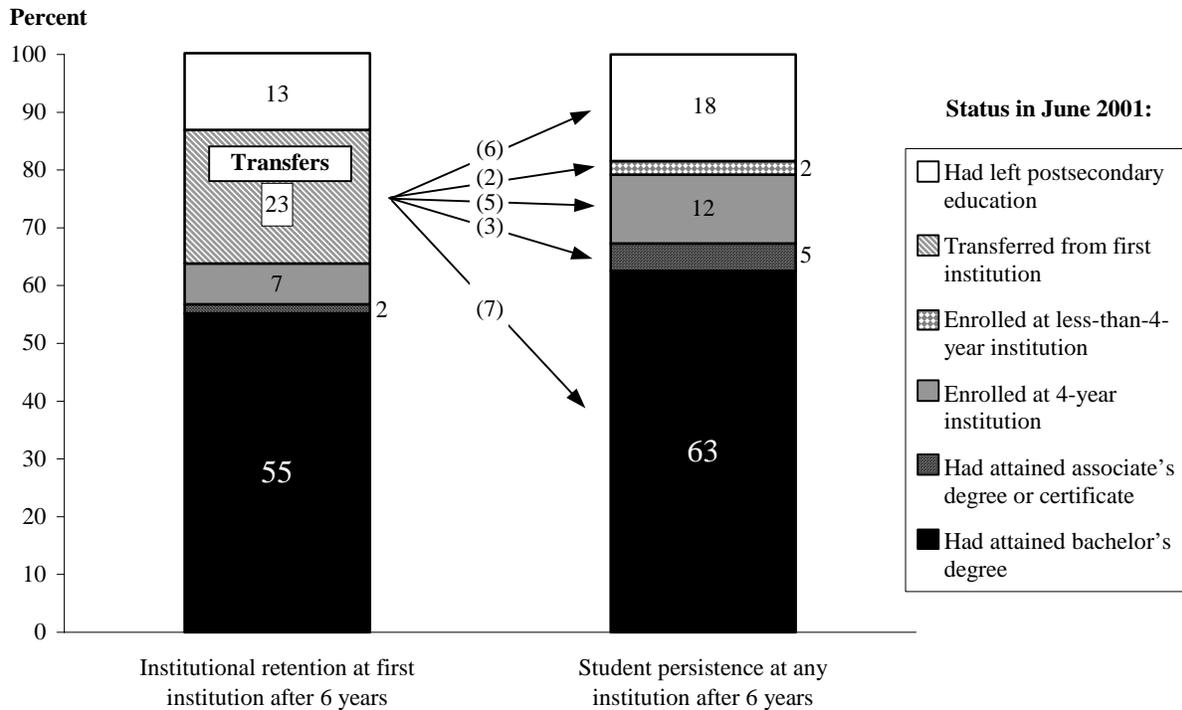
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01).

Some students who transferred from their first institution later left postsecondary education without a degree, while others were still enrolled in June 2001 or had already attained a degree at another institution. In figure B, the numbers in the arrows indicate the percentages of students who transferred and then had various outcomes at any postsecondary institution. For example, 6 percent of students who began at a 4-year institution with a bachelor’s degree goal transferred from their first institution and then left postsecondary education without a degree after attending the transfer institution. Seven percent, however, transferred and then completed a bachelor’s degree at a different 4-year institution.

Number of years to complete a degree at different types of institutions

Thirty-four percent of beginners with a bachelor’s degree goal completed that degree at their first institution within 4 years, and another 21 percent finished in 5 to 6 years, for a total of 55 percent completing a bachelor’s degree at the first institution within 6 years of starting there (table B). Those who began at a private not-for-profit institution were more likely to complete their bachelor’s degree at that institution than those who began at a public institution (65 percent vs. 50 percent) and were more likely to have finished in 4 years (52 percent vs. 24 percent).

Figure B.—Percentage distribution of students with a bachelor’s degree goal who were first-time beginners at a 4-year institution in 1995–96, by their enrollment status or degree attainment at the first institution attended and anywhere in postsecondary education, as of June 2001



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Students who transferred after attaining a degree are only included in the attainment categories.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01).

Differences in completion rates by enrollment patterns and student characteristics

Among beginners with a bachelor’s degree goal, student rates of completion at any 4-year institution varied by enrollment patterns (table B). Students who did not transfer, were always enrolled full time, or were continuously enrolled without a break had higher 6-year completion rates (72–74 percent) than other students, and about 45 percent graduated within 4 years.

Students who entered college with good academic preparation—those who received mostly A’s in high school, took two or more Advanced Placement (AP) tests, or had high SAT scores—also had higher completion rates than others. About 80 percent completed a bachelor’s degree within 6 years, and more than one-half (55–61 percent) graduated within 4 years.

Among beginners with a bachelor’s degree goal, women had higher completion rates than men and were more likely to finish in 4 years

Table B.—Percentage of students beginning at 4-year institutions in 1995–96 with a bachelor’s degree goal who completed a bachelor’s degree at the first institution attended or at any 4-year institution by June 2001, and the number of years to complete the degree, by type of first institution, enrollment patterns, academic preparation, and student characteristics

	Bachelor’s degree completion rate					
	At first 4-year institution			At any 4-year institution		
	4 years or less	More than 4 years*	6-year total	4 years or less	More than 4 years*	6-year total
Total beginners with a bachelor’s degree goal	34.2	21.1	55.3	36.5	26.1	62.7
First institution type and highest offering						
Public 4-year	24.3	25.7	50.0	26.3	31.0	57.3
Non-doctorate-granting	18.6	21.7	40.3	20.9	28.0	48.9
Doctorate-granting	27.4	27.8	55.2	29.2	32.6	61.8
Private not-for-profit 4-year	51.5	13.8	65.3	54.6	18.4	73.0
Non-doctorate-granting	48.2	13.8	62.0	50.8	18.8	69.6
Doctorate-granting	57.6	13.8	71.4	61.5	17.8	79.3
Enrollment patterns						
Never transferred	44.7	27.7	72.4	44.7	27.7	72.4
Always full time	42.2	22.8	65.0	45.0	27.8	72.8
Continuously enrolled	41.7	24.4	66.1	44.2	29.4	73.6
Good academic preparation						
Mostly A’s in high school	52.3	21.5	73.8	55.3	26.8	82.0
Took two or more Advanced Placement tests	57.3	17.5	74.8	60.9	21.4	82.3
SAT combined score in high quartile (1030–1600)	53.0	19.0	72.0	56.5	23.1	79.6
Gender						
Male	29.5	22.5	52.0	31.0	27.7	58.7
Female	38.1	20.0	58.0	41.1	24.9	66.0
Race/ethnicity						
White, non-Hispanic	37.8	21.2	59.0	40.5	26.3	66.8
Black, non-Hispanic	19.8	21.1	40.9	20.8	24.9	45.7
Hispanic	22.7	18.6	41.3	24.7	22.6	47.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	40.0	23.8	63.8	41.5	28.9	70.5
Dependent family income in 1994						
Less than \$25,000	23.5	23.3	46.8	25.6	28.1	53.7
\$25,000–44,999	32.1	20.2	52.3	33.8	25.4	59.1
\$45,000–69,999	36.8	23.0	59.7	38.8	28.8	67.6
\$70,000 or more	45.9	21.5	67.5	49.7	27.0	76.6
Delayed postsecondary enrollment						
Did not delay	36.3	22.9	59.2	38.9	28.4	67.4
Delayed	22.9	11.3	34.2	23.5	13.4	36.8

*Up to 6 years.

NOTE: These completion rates are based on the number of months between the date of first enrollment and bachelor’s degree completion. The 4-year rate includes those who completed in 48 months or less after they first enrolled. These rates may differ slightly from bachelor’s degree attainment percentages based on status at the end of an academic year, such as those in figure A. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01).

(table B). Hispanic and Black, non-Hispanic students had lower completion rates than Asian/Pacific Islander and White, non-Hispanic students. Low-income dependent students had lower completion rates than high-income dependent students.

Profile of 1995–96 Beginners Who Completed a Bachelor’s Degree by June 2001

A number of factors have been shown to put students at risk of not completing their degree programs. Two of the most important ones are part-time enrollment and delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school. Other factors are not having a regular high school diploma, having children, being a single parent, being financially independent of parents, and working full time while enrolled. In prior studies, a persistence risk index was developed based on the number of these adverse characteristics (Horn 1996). All of these risk factors are also associated with “nontraditional” students, and the more risk factors a student has, the more nontraditional the student may be considered to be. Conversely, students with none of the risk factors may be considered to be highly traditional students: they enroll immediately after receiving a high school diploma, attend full time in the first year, are financially dependent on their parents, and work part time or not at all while enrolled.

Beginners who started at 4-year institutions in 1995–96 were predominantly traditional students: most of them had entered college without delay after high school, and most had none of the characteristics associated with a high risk of not completing a degree. This pattern is reflected in the profile of those college graduates who started at a 4-year institution in 1995–96 and had

completed a bachelor’s degree by June 2001: 91 percent had entered college immediately after high school, and 86 percent had no persistence risk factors when they first enrolled in 1995–96.

Students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree within 4 years were well prepared when they entered college. More than one-half had received mostly A’s in high school (62 percent) or had SAT test scores in the highest quartile among college freshmen (56 percent), and 30 percent had taken two or more AP tests. Women represented a majority (62 percent) of the college graduates who started at a 4-year institution in 1995–96 and completed a bachelor’s degree in the expected 4-year period.

Students who began at public 2-year institutions were more likely to be nontraditional students than those who began at 4-year institutions. Almost one-half of the beginners at public 2-year institutions had delayed starting college after high school, and about one-half had two or more persistence risk factors when they started. Traditional students (those with no risk factors when they began) represented about one-half (56 percent) of the bachelor’s degree recipients who had transferred from public 2-year institutions. The other half were nontraditional students who began their education in 1995–96 with a higher risk of not completing a degree at all, but had been able to enter a bachelor’s degree program via a community college.

Summary and Conclusion

Differences in the bachelor’s degree completion rates of students who began at community colleges and those who began at 4-year colleges and universities reflect differences in the degree goals, academic preparation, enrollment patterns, and demographic

characteristics of these students. Compared with students who started at 4-year institutions, those who started at public 2-year institutions were less well prepared for college and were less likely to be continuously enrolled. Beginners at public 2-year institutions were also more likely to enroll part time, to have delayed enrolling after high school, and to be nontraditional students starting postsecondary education with one or more persistence risk factors.

Beginners at 4-year institutions were predominantly traditional students with no persistence risk factors when they started college, and they were usually enrolled full time. Among those with a bachelor's degree goal, 55 percent of the beginners at 4-year institutions completed a bachelor's degree at the institution where they had started. When transfer students who completed

their degrees at a different institution are also included, a total of 63 percent of the students who began at a 4-year institution with a bachelor's degree goal completed that degree within 6 years.

Although the expected length of time required to complete a bachelor's degree is 4 years, 37 percent of the students with a bachelor's degree goal who started at a 4-year institution in 1995–96 actually finished their degree in that period of time. The characteristics of the students who were most likely to graduate within 4 years with a bachelor's degree fit a commonly held perception of what a college student looks like—he or she receives good academic preparation in high school, enters college immediately after high school, enrolls in college full time, and is continuously enrolled.