
Today's News

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Federal Report Documents Volatility of Community-College Students' Plans

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Washington

Many students do not follow a carefully charted path through higher education but instead seem to feel their way—and, sometimes, lose it, a new [federal report](#) on community colleges suggests.

Many community-college students previously thought they would be going through four-year colleges, while others initially planned on earning two-year degrees but have since revised their plans to progress much further, the report says.

The Education Department issued the report on community colleges on Wednesday as a supplement to "The Condition of Education 2008," an annual compendium of data published in May by the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition to its findings regarding students, the report contains extensive descriptive data on community colleges, analyzing how they compare with other sectors of higher education and charting how they have changed over time.

In analyzing federal data on community-college students, the new report does not attempt to explain why many such students alter their educational plans and expectations. Instead, it focuses on quantifying how many change course at various stages in the educational process.

Among students who graduated from high school in 2004 and enrolled in community colleges that fall, the report says, 39 percent had said that as high-school seniors they planned to enroll in four-year colleges immediately after high school and to earn a bachelor's degree or higher.

Many of the 2004 graduates who enrolled in community colleges and did not, as high-school seniors, see themselves continuing beyond community college subsequently ended up adopting more ambitious plans. Asked about their education plans two years later, about 36 percent said they planned to attend a four-year college or university, and about 11 percent said they planned to earn a graduate degree.

Raising Student Aspirations

Michael Planty, a research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics and co-author of the report, said he did not have enough information to know whether such findings reflected positively on community colleges—suggesting they were getting students to aim higher—or negatively, suggesting that many students had concluded "the community-college environment just did not fit their needs."

But Melinda Mechur Karp, a senior research associate at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, said she has seen data suggesting that community colleges raise students' aspirations. "It is not off base to speculate that students get to college and realize either that they are college material or college is relevant," she said.

The Education Department's report makes clear, however, that just having ambitions to continue in higher education is not enough for many students. Of those who entered community colleges as freshmen in the 2003-4 academic year and said at the time that they intended to transfer to a four-year college, 39 percent had left college by 2006 without completing a certificate or degree program. By contrast, 17 percent of students who entered four-year public colleges or universities the same year, and 16 percent of students who had entered private, nonprofit four-year colleges, were no longer in enrolled in a higher-education institution by 2006.

Kent A. Phillippe, a senior research associate at the American Association of Community Colleges, said those findings may be explained by community colleges' role as providers of education to many students from families without higher-education experience. Such students, he said, often "don't have any knowledge of what to expect from college," so "when they say 'I want to get an associate degree' or 'I want to get a bachelor's degree,' many don't even know what that means."

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