



Breakthrough White Paper: Four Year Colleges vs. Community Colleges

Breakthrough Collaborative Five Year Goal: 85% of students enter *four year* colleges or universities.

Q: Why does Breakthrough emphasize four year colleges and universities? Should Breakthrough programs steer students to use community colleges as “stepping stones” toward bachelor’s degrees? Would community colleges be cheaper for students? Does it matter where students start their post-secondary educations, as long as they end up with bachelor’s degrees?

A: It is true that once students have their bachelor’s degrees, it makes little difference, in terms of earnings potential and job prospects, what path they took to get there. However, the likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree is significantly reduced if a student starts her post-secondary education at a community college, and the amount of time it takes to complete a bachelor’s degree (and potentially, the amount of loans a student accrues) is greatly increased. Additionally, research shows that the kinds of students Breakthrough serves—low-income, minority, first generation—are less likely to transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and earn bachelor’s degrees. Therefore, the research supports the fact that students are more likely to complete bachelor’s degrees if they start their post-secondary educations at four-year colleges or universities.

Is community college more cost-effective?

Without factoring in financial aid, the average tuition and fees at community college is less than half of the average tuition and fees at a public four-year institution and 1/10th of the tuition and fees at a private four year institution. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average annual tuition and fees in 2006-07 was:

- \$2,017 -in-state student attending a community college
- \$5,685 - full-time, in-state student at a public four year college or university
- \$20,492 - full time student at a private four year college and university

However, while the tuition and fees at community colleges are significantly less, without knowing a student’s financial aid package at a four year institution, it is difficult to determine the relative cost-effectiveness. Additionally, considering the amount of time it takes students who begin in community college to complete their bachelor’s degrees, it is unclear how much cost savings there is in the end.

Does it take longer for students to complete bachelor's degrees if they start at community colleges?

On average, it takes students 1½-2 years longer to complete bachelor's degrees if they begin at community colleges than if they begin at four-year colleges. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average time it takes to complete a bachelor's degree is:

- 71 months for students who begin at 2-year colleges
- 55 months for students who begin at four year public colleges
- 50 months for students who begin at four year private colleges

Is there a difference in the earnings of community college graduates and graduates of four-year institutions?

If community college students do manage to transfer quickly and graduate from four-year colleges, there is little evidence to show that there are significant earning differentials between students who start at community colleges and students who start at four-year colleges (Kane and Rouse, 1995; Hilmer, 2000). The problem is that many community college students do not quickly transfer into four-year colleges nor do they ultimately complete their bachelor's degrees.

For those individuals who start at community colleges and don't transfer to four-year institutions, there are repercussions in terms of their earnings potential. The average annual median income for adults who have associate's degrees is approximately \$13,000 less per year than adults who have bachelor's degrees (\$32,900 vs. \$45,700), or \$500,000 less in estimated lifetime earnings (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002).

If the intention is to change the economic trajectory of Breakthrough students (i.e., end the cycle of poverty), then having Breakthrough students begin their post-secondary educations at four-year colleges is the best way to ensure they complete their bachelor's degrees.

Is there a difference in the attrition rates of students at community colleges vs. students at four-year colleges?

The attrition rate for students at community colleges, even those students who have an explicit intent to pursue bachelor's degrees, is far greater than the attrition rate of students at four year colleges. In 2006:

- 39% of students at community colleges who intended to pursue bachelor's degrees left school without completing a degree or certificate program
- 17% of students at four year public colleges left school without completing a degree
- 16% of students at four year private colleges left school without completing a degree

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2008 Special Analysis of Community College data)

Is there a difference in the bachelor's degree completion rates of students at community colleges vs. students at four-year colleges?

The eight year bachelor's degree completion rate for students starting at community colleges is far lower (17%) than for students starting at public four-year colleges (57%) and for students starting at private four-year colleges (78%) (Bound et al, 2007). This disparity is not surprising because community colleges, with their open admissions policies, accept a far different demographic than four-year colleges. However, even the highest achieving students do not attain bachelor's degrees at very high rates when they begin their post-secondary education at community colleges. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that only 34% of high-achieving high school graduates (i.e., students who score at the highest proficiency levels on math and English assessments in high school) who started their post secondary education at community colleges attain a bachelor's degree six years later (National Center for Education Statistics, Special Analysis 2008: Community Colleges).

When looking only at the population of students who start at community colleges but do manage to transfer to four-year colleges (only about 1/3 of community college students transfer to four-year colleges), the rates of bachelor's degree completion increase. However, the bachelor's degree completion rates of transfer students are still significantly lower than students who start at four-year colleges (44% of transfer students completed bachelor's degrees within 6 years vs. 63% of students who began at four-year colleges) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 data).

Are some community college students at higher risk of not transferring into four-year institutions?

Research shows that at each stage in the education pipeline, low-income students, minority students, and first-generation college students are at higher risk of dropping out. This is true, too, at the point of transition from community college to four-year institutions. The rates at which students transfer from community colleges into four-year colleges are significantly lower for African-American and Latino students, low-income students, and first-generation college students. For example, only 11 percent of low-income community college students transferred to four-year institutions as compared to 48 percent of high-income students (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005).

Is there a role for community colleges in the post-secondary education of Breakthrough students?

Although the research clearly shows the advantages of starting one's post-secondary education at a four-year institution (e.g., greater likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree, shorter time to completion), community college can be a viable step towards a bachelor's degree for some students, given the right support. Similar to students who enter comprehensive public high schools who need greater support than students who enter independent high schools, students who begin their post-secondary educations at community colleges will need greater support, including ongoing access to information and advising on financial aid procedures, admission standards for four year colleges, and pre-requisites.

Students wishing to transfer from community college to four-year institutions will not only need external support, but they will also need to be skilled in advocating for themselves. Because community colleges vary in how accommodating they are to students wishing to transfer to four-year institutions,

students must be prepared to be diligent, self-motivated, and persistent to navigate the transfer process. For students who begin their post-secondary educations at community college, the paths to bachelor-degree completion are usually longer and usually riskier. Therefore, for most Breakthrough students, the paths that will most assuredly lead to bachelor's degrees are ones that begin at four-year institutions.

References:

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