Do Transfer Students Perform as well as First-time Freshmen?

The Academic Performance of Baccalaureate Students: Comparing Transfer Students to First-time Freshmen

Across CUNY’s 17 undergraduate colleges, many students transfer in the course of pursuing their degrees. Among CUNY’s senior colleges, the percentage of fall entrants who are transfer students ranges from 42-60%. Previous research has not adequately addressed whether transfer students perform as well as students who begin baccalaureate study as first-time freshmen (FTF). To answer this question, we analyze the relative probability of graduation for transfer students and FTFs at CUNY, controlling for a variety of factors that may influence their academic performance.

How do transfer students compare on graduation rates?

Figure 1 shows that if we compare all transfer students to first-time freshmen upon who entered a baccalaureate program in fall 2005, transfer students are 6 percentage points more likely to graduate by the spring of 2009. However, this is not a valid comparison because transfer students have had a head start on degree progress in their associate programs, earning an average of 50 credits before transferring. To properly account for the fact that transfer students have had the opportunity to accumulate more credits than FTFs before registering in the baccalaureate program, we repeat this analysis limiting our sample to students who have earned 30-60 credits. When we

![Figure 1](image-url)
measure degree progress from a common starting line, our results are quite different: Transfer students are nearly 25 percentage points less likely to graduate, as shown in the second bar in Figure 1.

**Why are transfer students less likely to graduate than FTFs?**

Results suggest that associate transfer students are less likely to complete their degree in part because they tend to come from more disadvantaged backgrounds and are less academically prepared for the demands of a bachelor’s level degree program. In Figure 2, the 25 percentage point achievement gap is shown again in the first bar. Subsequent bars show the size of the graduation gap when we add sets of control variables in our regression model to adjust for differences between transfers and FTFs.

These control variables substantially reduce — but do not completely eliminate — the gap. Of the unadjusted 25 percentage point graduation gap, 7.7 points can be explained by demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, and immigration status. Another 6.9 percentage points are explained by academic preparation and performance in high school. Finally, the gap closes another 3.6 percentage points after we account for academic performance in the first two semesters in the baccalaureate program and for enrollment decisions such as full-time attendance. After controlling for all these factors, however, there remains a 6.4 percentage point gap, as shown in the last bar of Figure 2.

A closer look at the college performance of transfer students

Because academic performance in college is strongly related to the likelihood that a student will ultimately graduate, we examine several other performance indicators count for academic performance in the first two semesters in the baccalaureate program and for enrollment decisions such as full-time attendance. After controlling for all these factors, however, there remains a 6.4 percentage point gap, as shown in the last bar of Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

**Relative Probability of Graduation, Transfer Student vs. FTF**

- 21.6% Unadjusted
- -11.5%
- -10.0%
- 6.1%

**Figure 3**

**Average GPAs, FTFs and Transfer Students**

1. We counted all of the credits earned in the associate program for transfer students and all of the credits earned by both transfer and native FTF students in the baccalaureate program.
2. Figure 2 shows regression coefficients from linear probability models that include controls for cohort year and baccalaureate college of entry. As a sensitivity analysis, the same models were estimated using logistic regression with results that were qualitatively the same. Results from linear probability models are shown for ease of interpretation.
3. Figure 3 displays regression adjusted mean GPAs from a regression model with a full set of controls, including demographic background, high school performance, college enrollment patterns, early college performance, cohort year, baccalaureate college of entry, and indicators for missing data. For the adjusted mean calculation, all covariates are set to their sample mean.
Figure 4 displays regression adjusted credits attempted and sensitivity analyses completed as described in footnote 2. In addition, the Pathways Initiative, approved to transfer, reducing the differences noted in the Administrators who wish to design effective coursework.  

**Conclusion**

These results suggest that transfer students do not experience the same degree of academic success in the baccalaureate program as comparable freshmen. We are able to explain much of this gap by taking into account socioeconomic background and the quality of high school preparation. Academic experiences early in the bachelors program help to explain a substantial portion of the remaining difference, but not all.

Administrators who wish to design effective advisement and academic support programs for transfer students should take into account the lingering effects of the pre-transfer influences identified in this research.

In addition, the Pathways Initiative, approved by the CUNY Board of Trustees in June, is intended to eventually increase the amount of credit toward the baccalaureate degree that transfer students receive for courses taken prior to transfer, reducing the differences noted in the analysis and reported in Figure 5.

Finally, the value of total credits accumulated at CUNY is also smaller for transfer students than for native students. As seen in Figure 5, taking an additional semester of course work (12 credits) is associated with a 15% increase in the likelihood that an FTF will graduate, but only a 9% increase in the likelihood that a transfer student will graduate. This finding suggests that transfer students receive a smaller payoff in degree progress from courses completed in community college and senior college than FTFs obtain from their coursework.

Figure 6 shows the results of linear probability regression models estimated separately for transfer students and first-time freshmen. Estimates shown in the figure are adjusted for a full set of control variables as discussed in footnote 3, with sensitivity analyses completed as described in footnote 2.