Finding the Eligible: the Unrecognized Attainment of Community College Students

Cliff Adelman, Institute for Higher Education Policy, November 2010
This started in transcript-based national longitudinal studies

• 14 percent of the 1982-1993 cohort had earned 60+ credits but no degree of any kind
• 16 percent of the 1992-2000 cohort had earned 60+ credits but no degree of any kind
• That’s a big chunk of a traditional age cohort without degrees after such a long period (and they were 26-30 years old at the end), so...
A couple of schools decided to look into this:

• At the bachelor’s level, USC/UpState found 600+ students, chased them down, determined 180 eligible, and got 60 back to school (mid-1990s, well before the option of on-line course delivery)

• At the associate’s level, San Diego Miramar focused on retroactive degree awards, and increased Associate’s by 175 degrees (and certificates by 185) over two years (1999-2001). At that time, Miramar’s annual Associate’s degree base was 500, so the increase was about 18 percent.

While we are not dealing with certificates, start multiplying the other numbers by the volume of institutional type (weighted, of course, by enrollments)!!!
### The Associate’s Degree, I: Gross Awards, 2007-08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Control</th>
<th>Number Awarded 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>507.0k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year, for profit</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year, not-for-profit</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year public</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year, for profit</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year, not-for-profit</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>750.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Associate’s level is where one focuses, but one has to set further criteria

- Add GPA>2.0 and make sure all 60+ credits are additive: 70k
- + college-level math, not currently enrolled anywhere: Drops to 44k

Remember, these are traditional-age beginners only, so multiply by 1.44, the factor that includes delayed entries and older beginners, and you get 63k.

That’s pretty close to the San Diego Miramar one-year improvement ratio multiplied by 1.635 million community college beginners, 65k.

Fix it, and you increase the number of Associate’s degrees awarded annually by more than 9%; and the number of Associate’s awarded by community colleges by 13%. Not bad!
Project Win-Win: a Search for These Unrecognized Attainments

- A pilot with 7 community colleges in 4 states (LA, MD, NY, and OH)
- Plus 3 four-year colleges in Louisiana that award Associate’s degrees.
- 7 months to scan the records, sift out ineligibles, run degree audits, and establish final bins of “eligibles” and “potentials.” One state added a third bin for within-state vertical transfers without degrees.
- It’s not as easy a task as it sounds.
Everyone is under “initiative overload,”

but this one picks up the low-hanging apples.
And results in a map of differential attainment, i.e.

**differences between (a) formal recognition and (b) de facto thresholds of degree qualifications, with delineation of barriers between thresholds and recognition.**
Initial sort bin

- Not enrolled in 2009/2010
- Initial enrollment at any time after 2001 (2003 in some states)
- Initial enrollment can be transfer-in
- Credit threshold (60-64)
- GPA threshold: whatever is required for graduation
- No Associate’s earned from institution; no certificates, either.
Problems/observations in the initial sort bin

• Changes in computer systems and software during the period covered (in which cases one seriously questions whether the institution can say anything about student academic histories).

• **In-state institutions agreed on the credit threshold, but the actual range of credits earned was considerably higher.**

• **Credits do not mean degree eligibility.**

• The one institution that set a higher GPA threshold, 2.5, wound up with a lot fewer students. **Surprise?**

• **This should be a 2-day task. In some places, it took 2 months. “It’s not active work; it’s wait times for responses.”**
2nd sort: who left and subsequently enrolled elsewhere?

- These students are provisionally moved out of the pool.
- First match set goes to the central state data system. One state kept vertical transfers without degrees in consideration.
- Residuals (after state match) go to the National Student Clearinghouse.
- After both matches, residuals are in the pool for close examination.
Problems/observations on the second sort

- Some institutions skipped the state match and went directly to NSC.
- Some institutions used the project as an excuse to join NSC.
- NSC, we know, cannot produce enrollment answers for everybody; but turns up current enrollments for students thought to be gone, i.e. validates stop-out phenomena.
- State IT versus local IR as to who “owned” the information.
- FIRPA issues raised in one state; resolved with creation of a completely new set of IDs.
- All this takes a lot more time than originally anticipated; everyone has to have a say.
And just who is “everyone”? 

- IR
- IT
- Registrar
- Enrollment management (where a separate office exists)
- Student affairs
- CAO

The intensity of their roles changes as a project such as this moves forward.
How far did this get us?

Community colleges: 12k made the first sort; 48% stayed after the 2\textsuperscript{nd}
4-year colleges: 3300 made the first sort; 56% stayed after the 2\textsuperscript{nd}

We’re obviously not done, but those rough numbers tell you that this is not a trivial matter
3rd Sort: the Degree Audit

• Despite credits, GPA, etc., did they really qualify?
• Some institutions have developed software with degree templates; most do not have such aids.
• So you get hand-and-eye readings. These average about 10-15 minutes per case. The range is 5-25 minutes.
• And you get hand-and-eye even after an automated audit, i.e. the software does not pick up nuance.
• The reading is based on the student’s declared major.
• In general, the degree requirements are those currently in effect.

You begin to smell the problems that can turn up.
### The Associate’s Degree, II; Field distribution in the community college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Degree</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>211.2</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Acc’t</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied Health</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Tech</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What happens in the degree audit?

- The student may qualify for an AA/AS, but were seeking an A.A.S. in a specific field and could not pass audit on the degree sought.
- Auditors find courses that don’t exist anymore.
- One finds students with >100 credits who don’t pass audit.
- The AA/AS student may qualify by virtue of credits, but not specific courses required, degree requirements may have changed over a period of as much as 8 years, and the audit software is not set to requirements in force at the time of entry.
- In all these cases, the students are “academically short,” removed from the “Associate’s eligible” bin and placed in the “Associate’s potential” bin, unless . . .
- The number of credits/courses they are short exceeds what the institution determines is a reasonable ceiling for completion in a timely return-period, e.g. 9 credits / 3 courses. These students are moved out of the universe of consideration.
The residual “eligibles”: why were they not awarded degrees?

- Financial “holds,” i.e. money owed for a variety of reasons (see next slide).
- Did not file papers / pay fees for the degree award.
- Did not know they were eligible.
- Had transferred and did not care about the Associate’s.
- Had not completed a non-academic requirement, e.g. physical education, swimming test, orientation course.
- Missing transcripts from other institutions they had attended.
- Residency issues, both threshold and last 25 percent of credits.

Half of these are procedural issues, and largely within the control of community colleges.
Financial “holds”

- State laws / regulations apply, even for $15 in parking fines.
- Tuition versus fees.
- Institutional / state loan issues.
- Outstanding library, equipment, parking, etc. obligations.
- Transcripts from other institutions are on financial holds.

There is very little one can do about most of these without setting an uncomfortable precedent.
With all of that, how far did the 9 continuing institutions get in 7 months?

• Roughly 600 students were either awarded associate’s degrees or placed in line for the degree award;
• Nearly 1,600 students were identified as “potential” degree recipients, though no attempt to locate them had been undertaken by the censoring date of the Pilot phase.
• Not bad! At that pace, we should see at least 1,000 degree awards and 3,000 potentials by Spring 2011 from these schools alone.
What can institutions do?

- **Green light eligibility notification, including currently enrolled students.** Orange flashing lights should start at around 55 credits; one of our community colleges starts at 50.
- **Waive the degree fees, or build them into general student services fees, hence precluding a separate bill.**
- **Waive non-academic requirements.**
- **For those with “holds,” recognize completers on your books, and notify the students that neither the degree nor the institutional transcript will be released until the conditions of the “hold” are met.**
- **Notify students that they qualify for the degree, and ask if they want the diploma.** If no response, then the story ends there. If response negative, award the degree on your books and tell the student they can request a diploma later.
Why would eligible students decline degrees?

- The default degree offered, AA/AS or AGS, is not the one they want.
- If their intention is a particular AAS, they think they will lose financial aid eligibility when a default associate’s degree is accepted (not true: only the award of a bachelor’s degree closes the undergraduate financial aid window).
- Don’t see any value in the AA/AS or AGS---another variation in the differential attainment map.
And why would institutions delay the award of degrees to the “eligibles”?

‘cause they are under state mandates to improve degree production, and don’t want the extra degrees in their 2009/10 base year.
Procedural and regulatory questions

- Can the institution award a degree without the student’s consent? Can the institution apply for the degree on behalf of the student?
- **Can an institution force others to provide missing transcripts?**
- **Can the state system award the degree when the student’s multi-institutional record qualifies, but no residency requirement has been met?**
- **SHEEO, the principal partner in Win-Win 2, will raise such issues with state policy makers.**
Suggestions from participants

• Do this every 3 or 4 years. Stop-outs *do* return. Annual exercise is not necessary. *But some argue for doing it annually.*

• One of our institutions does it annually, and awarded 300 Associate’s degrees under these procedures in 2008.

• *Empower the state higher education authority to grant degrees, particularly in the cases of nomads with no distinct cognizant institution.*

• In degree audits, incorporate acceptable course substitutions into existing automated systems.
Some very hard-headed lessons

- There are community colleges out there without the data capacity or discipline to do any of this.
- You can’t pass on instructions by cell-phone: the parties responsible for executing must have written documents in hand and in a timely manner.
- Institutions have got to adopt explicit and public decision-rules in degree audits, e.g. that the audit is against degree requirements in force at the time of initial enrollment.
- To take this effort to scale would require special grants to community colleges to develop/refine degree audit systems.
So, in Phase 2 of Win-Win, what do we intend to do with both eligibles and potentials?

- In existing participating institutions, get the final “eligibles” Associate’s degrees in fall 2010.
- In existing participating institutions, find the “potentials,” send them templates for completing degrees, and get them started by Winter/Spring term of 2011.
- Add 2 community colleges in each participating state, with 2 years to get through the entire process pioneered by the existing group.
- Provide support for establishing/upgrading degree audit systems.
And what does Phase 2 actually look like?

- Six states (LA, MO, NY, OH, VA, WI)
- 35 institutions, 3 of which are multi-campus:
  - 21 community colleges;
  - 5 public four-year colleges that award associate’s degrees
  - 1 private four-year college that awards associate’s degrees
  - 1 for-profit four-year that awards associate’s degrees
  - 3 four-year colleges authorized to award associate’s degrees, but rarely do
    - 1 four-year college that does not award associate’s
  - 3 branch campuses of a state university where the principal award is the associate’s
That collection leads to 7 distinct models of looking for eligibles

- Full-cycle (most community colleges in the group)
- Full-cycle interstate (the 2 CCDs in MO)
- Feeder (e.g. Monroe CC to SUNY/Brockport), initiated by the community college, follows transfer students
- Reverse Feeder (ULA/Lafeyette and Southeastern LA CC), initiated by the four-year college based on transfer students
- Resident Four-Year; principally associate’s eligibility for current resident students
- Branch Campus, with students often attending both main and branch
- Four-Year Retroactive; current resident students not an issue
Analytic Tasks

- Demography of eligibles and potentials (gender, race/ethnicity, age at entrance, Pell status, transfer-in status, vertical transfer status) compared to demography of (a) all institutional enrollees, and (b) degree recipients.
- Cost/benefits. Staff level and time for data cuts, degree audits, certification of eligibility, resolution of “holds,” finding the “potentials,” etc.
- Disposition of awards: on institution’s books only; accepted/rejected by students; reasons for rejection.
- Locating “potentials”: systems used, sequence, and results.
SHEEO as a Partner

- **Executes the evaluation**
- **Picks up the state policy issues**
- **Formulates policy options for state systems**
- **Brings the options to its forums**
- **Provides considerable visibility and authority to the effort.**
This is a do-something project!

- We’re not complaining about anything;
- We’re not asking just to do more research;
- We’re not making dog-and-pony-show recommendations.

We have partners who understand what this is about, how difficult it is, and how important it can be to students, institutions, and the nation’s account books.

AND WE ARE NOT GOING AWAY!