

Why We Need a New Outcome Measure in the Community College Space

In 2019, we started looking for ways to measure community college success (analogous to high school or college graduation rates) across the Fifth District. We wanted to observe community colleges within states and compare similar schools across states.

Community colleges differ from four-year institutions in important ways, but they are often measured by the same metrics. The primary data source for all higher education outcomes is the Integrated Post-Secondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), which was created in 1992. The U.S. Department of Education requires higher education institutions to submit data to IPEDS on a range of topics from finances to enrollment to graduation rates. IPEDS is currently the only publicly available source of outcomes data that is consistent across states. These data are used by practitioners, legislators, researchers, parents, counselors, and many others to examine higher education outcomes.

While the universality of IPEDS is invaluable, there are some issues particular to the measurement of community college success. When we talked to community college leaders across the Fifth District, three concerns with the currently available data stood out: (1) the calculation of student cohorts; (2) the definition of student success; and (3) the absence of non-credit data. These issues led us to create a survey and develop our

own measure of community college success. The measure is designed to complement the available IPEDS data. As we prepare to release our (extended pilot) survey results later this fall, we want to highlight the measurement issues that stood out to community college leaders, and how we believe our success metric will change the conversation.

Issue #1: Cohort Calculations Do Not Represent the Diverse Students Community Colleges Serve

Our Approach: Calculate success based on a cohort that more accurately reflects the diversity of community college students

A school's graduation rate is based on a cohort of students. The graduation rate in IPEDS uses a full-time, first-time cohort of students who entered an institution in a given year. These are students who have never attended college before and are enrolled full time. IPEDS then calculates the share of the students in the cohort who graduate (complete a degree or credit-bearing certificate) within 150 percent of expected time to completion. For four-year institutions, this is typically six years (based on the typical four-year path to a bachelor's degree). For community colleges, this is typically three years since associate degrees are expected to be completed in two years.

To illustrate the challenges that community colleges might have with this cohort definition, we

consider how the cohort looks at three different Fifth District schools — a small, private institution, a large public research institution, and a community college — in the fall of 2021. We'll start with Washington and Lee, a small, highly selective private university in Lexington, Virginia. Ninety-seven percent of entering students attended full time and were enrolling in college for the first time. In this case, the IPEDS cohort closely matches their total number of entering students. At Virginia Tech, a large research institution in Blacksburg, Virginia, 87 percent of entering students were both full-time and first-time college students. In this case, the IPEDS cohort includes a smaller percentage of students compared to Washington and Lee, but the percentage is still high. On the other hand, at Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Virginia, only 35 percent of entering students were both full-time and first-time college students. In this case, the cohort in which we measure success includes fewer than half of their students. If these students are not representative of the whole student body (which they likely are not), any measure of success would be flawed.

The goal of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond's Survey of Community College Outcomes (SCCO) is to consider the success rate for a very broad group of students, including full- and part-time students. In addition, we include all students who are attending the community college for the first time, even if they are not a first-time college student.

Issue #2: It's Not All About Graduation

Our Approach: Expand the measure of success to include transfer to four-year institutions, industry-recognized credential and certificate attainment, and "persisters"

Why do people attend institutions of higher education? In many cases, especially at four-year institutions, the purpose is to obtain a bachelor's degree. For four-year colleges and universities, it makes sense that IPEDS success rates only measure those who graduate with a degree or a credit-bearing certificate. At community colleges, however, it is much more common for students to enroll with plans that do not include degree attainment. Community colleges offer associate degrees, but they also offer short-term credentials, one-year certificates, and other education products. In addition, data show that many students enter community college with plans to transfer to a four-year institution. In our outreach, students, companies, and community colleges report that limiting success to degree attainment loses much of what they offer to students.

Consider a student who enrolls in an Associate of Applied Science Degree in Cybersecurity. In the third semester, as part of the degree program, he obtains the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) credential. Getting a job with this credential would double his pre-community college income. So, he decides to discontinue his studies and begin working as a cybersecurity professional for a local information technology firm. Has the community college served him successfully? According to the graduation rate, the answer is no, because he did not complete the degree.

However, through the lens of training our workforce, we believe that the attainment of any industry-recognized credential or certificate should be considered a success. In fact, credentials that range from six-week training programs to two-year associate degrees, are often exactly what we are asking our community colleges to offer to ready our workforce for available jobs. We would not want to create an incentive system that discourages community colleges from embedding certificates and credentials within their associate degree programs. Thus, in addition to associate degree attainment, in our measure of success, we also include:

1. Industry-recognized certificate or credential attainment
2. Successful transfers to four-year institutions
3. Persistence in enrollment (in good standing) for four years

Issue #3: Community College's Non-Credit Offerings, Critical to Workforce Development, Are Excluded From Traditional Metrics

Our Approach: Collect data on community colleges' non-credit enrollment and completion

At four-year institutions, nearly all students enroll in credit-bearing programs. At community colleges, however, there are equally important non-credit programs that are often shorter term and workforce-focused. It is common to see programs such as commercial driver's licenses (CDL), phlebotomy, or welding on the list of non-credit offerings. Higher education institutions are not required to submit non-credit data to IPEDS, and the data collection mechanisms for non-credit vary significantly

across states. In Maryland, for example, where non-credit courses are funded at equivalent rates to credit courses, their data collection is relatively robust. In other states, where non-credit is not funded via state appropriations, or it is funded at a lower rate, data can be harder to obtain.

We are working to collect data on non-credit programs as a part of the SCCO. Unfortunately, the data are not currently complete enough to construct a success rate in the same way as students enrolled in credit-bearing programs. However, we do have enough non-credit data to see that a very large number of students are enrolled in these programs. Not counting them, and not measuring their success, is problematic both for the institutions and for stakeholders attempting to evaluate the work of community colleges. We plan to continue our efforts to collect non-credit data as we move forward and hope we can eventually use it in our success metric calculations.

While we know that no data collection effort is perfect, we are excited to add insight to how community colleges across the Fifth District are serving their students.

We look forward to sharing the full results of this survey with you. You can also read much more about Fifth District community colleges on our website: richmondfed.org.



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