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DIVIDED WE FAIL IN LA:

Improving Completion and Closing Racial Gaps in the Los Angeles Community College District

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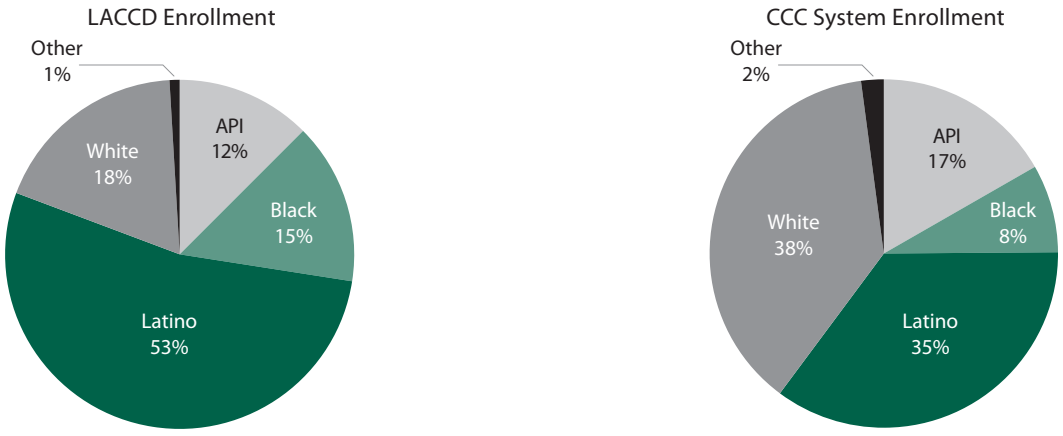
More College Graduates are Needed in Los Angeles; LA Community College District is Key

A recent report titled *Divided We Fail: Improving Completion and Closing Racial Gaps in California's Community Colleges* shows that student outcomes in the state's community colleges are inadequate to meet the projected demand for college-educated workers in the labor market.[1] The report also documents the serious problem posed by the disparities in outcomes across racial/ethnic groups, disparities that leave the growing populations of under-represented minority (primarily Latino and black) students much less likely to complete college degrees. The impact of continued racial disparities on the workforce is especially relevant in the Los Angeles region, given its size and diversity. Educational attainment among the large and growing Latino population is a particular concern, as the Latino share of the working-age population in Los Angeles County is projected to grow from 44% currently to about 50% in 2020 and 60% in 2040.[2]

The Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) is the largest district in the state, enrolling over 250,000 students annually - about one in 10 of all students in the 72 districts of the California Community College (CCC) system. It serves a substantially higher share of URM students than the system as a whole (Figure 1), with blacks and Latinos accounting for 68% of enrolled students compared to 43% systemwide. At the request of Alliance for a Better Community, an organization dedicated to enhancing opportunities for Latinos to ensure the well-being of the Los Angeles region, this report summarizes student progress over 6 years for over 18,000 students in the LACCD. As we did for the CCC system in *Divided We Fail*, we examine student progress through intermediate outcomes (called "milestones") and on to the completion of certificates, degrees and transfers.[3] Analyses of student progress and outcomes in LACCD and other large urban districts can contribute to an understanding of the challenges faced by those colleges that serve the most diverse student populations, with all the issues of under-preparation and lack of economic and social resources that accompany that diversity. While these colleges, like others, must ensure that they are implementing effective campus practices, the challenges they face may call for broader solutions involving changes to system and state policy that would help large urban districts afford and sustain their efforts.

Figure 1
Under-represented Minorities Make Up a Larger Share of Enrollment at LACCD than Systemwide (Fall 2009)



Source: California Postsecondary Education Commission; excludes students in non-resident alien and no response categories

[1] Moore, C. & Shulock, N. (2010). *Divided We Fail: Improving Completion and Closing Racial Gaps in California's Community Colleges*. Sacramento, CA: Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy.

[2] California Department of Finance (2007, July). *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail*, 2000–2050. Sacramento, CA: Author.

[3] The *Divided We Fail* report has a detailed description of the data and methods. This report summarizes results for students who initially enrolled in one of the nine colleges of the LACCD during 2003-04, and were identified as "degree-seekers," those enrolling in community college for the purpose of earning a certificate or degree or transferring to a university, defined as those enrolling in more than 6 credits in the first year.

Too Few LACCD Students Reach Milestones on the Road to Degree Completion

Figure 2 shows the percent of degree seekers in the 2003-04 cohort of LACCD students that achieved different milestones within six years. The results indicate that:

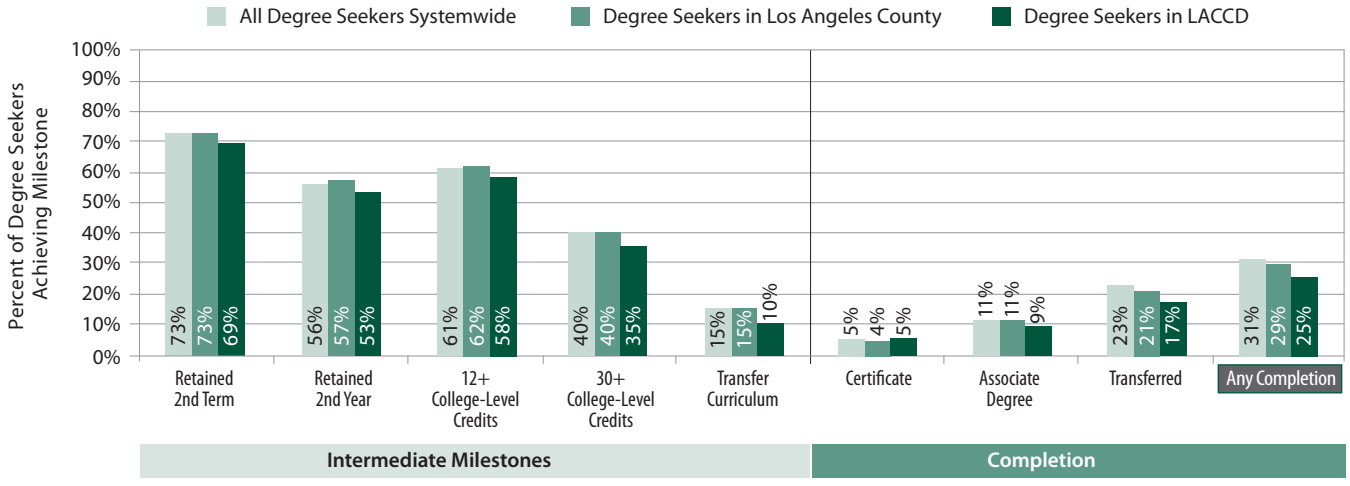
- overall, only 25% of degree seekers in LACCD completed a certificate or degree, or transferred to a university within six years of enrolling in the CCC
- 69% of LACCD students were retained to the second term; 53% to the second year
- 58% of students completed at least 12 college-level credits, a measure that has been used to indicate "college pathway status"
- 35% earned one year of college-level credits (30 semester credits), the point often associated with increased earnings
- although 17% transferred to a university, only 10% completed a transfer curriculum, indicating that many students transfer without first completing two years of college credits
- 5% of students earned a certificate and 9% were awarded an associate degree.

At nearly every point along the continuum of intermediate milestones through to completion, LACCD outcomes were somewhat lower than in LA County colleges overall and in the CCC system as a whole.

Figure 3 shows that white and Asian-Pacific Islander (API) students in the LACCD were more likely to reach intermediate milestones and complete their programs than were black and Latino students.

- Approximately one-third of white (35%) and API (30%) students completed something (certificate, degree, or transfer), compared to 22% of black students and 18% of Latinos.
- Latino students were about as likely as white students to persist to the second term (not shown) and second year, but they were less likely to reach the other milestones, and were less than half as likely as white students to transfer (11% of Latinos transferred compared to 28% of whites).
- Less than half (43%) of black students were enrolled one year after their first term.
- Black students were also less likely than white students to transfer (15% of blacks transferred), and they were the least likely by far to complete a transfer curriculum, suggesting that black students are the most likely to move to a university after completing a relatively small number of CCC credits.
- Black students completed degrees at a lower rate than Latino students, but their higher rate of transfer (though mostly without completing a transfer curriculum) led to a higher overall completion rate.
- These racial/ethnic differences in outcomes were similar to those found in LA County and the CCC systemwide.

Figure 2
Milestone Attainment and Completion within 6 Years



Too Few LACCD Students Reach Milestones on the Road to Degree Completion

Simply put, the "completing class" out of LACCD looked quite different from the entering class. Because of their lower rates of success, under-represented minority (URM) students made up a much lower share of "completers" (49%) than they did of incoming degree seekers (65%) in the LACCD (Figure 4). The drop from entry share to completion share was largely accounted for by Latinos, who made up nearly half of incoming degree seekers but a third of completers.

Table 1 shows that for all racial/ethnic groups for each of four outcomes, LACCD students had lower rates of success than LA County colleges and the CCC system as a whole. That tells us that the lower rates of progress and success of LACCD students displayed earlier (Figure 2) are not entirely explained by the large share of black and Latino students in the district. There was one exception to poorer LACCD outcomes across the board: a larger share of LACCD students earned a certificate (although certificates accounted for a very small part of CCC outcomes everywhere in the system).

Figure 3
Selected Milestone Attainment and Completion Within 6 Years by Race/Ethnicity in LACCD

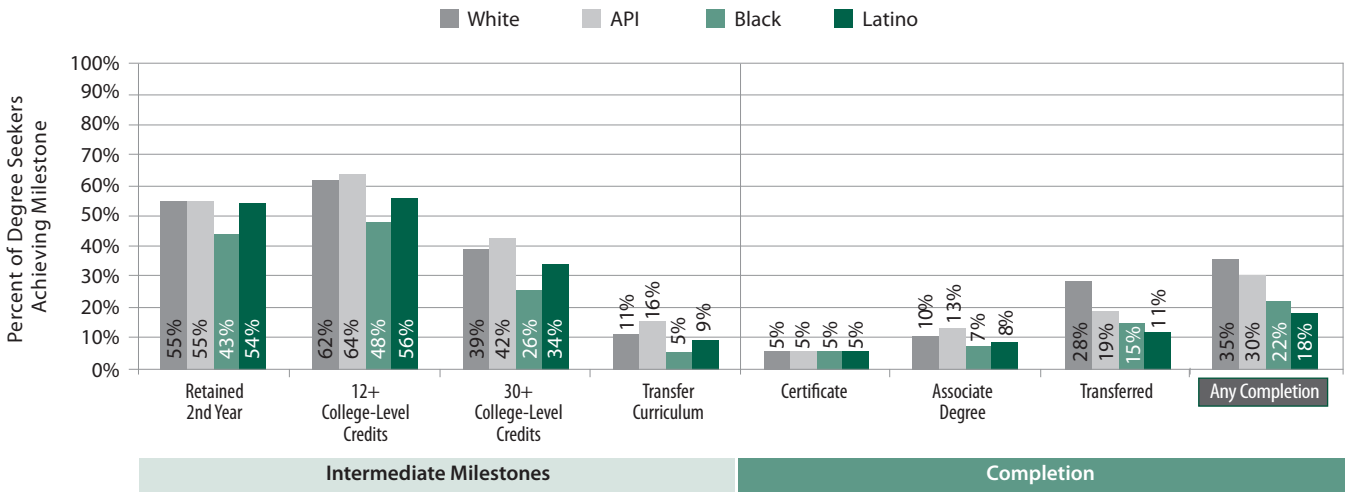


Figure 4
Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Degree-Seekers Compared to "Completers" in the LACCD

Table 1
LACCD Had Lower Rates of Success for Each Racial/Ethnic Group

Milestones by Race/Ethnicity	LACCD	LA County Colleges	CCC System
White			
30+ College-Level Credits	**39%**	44%	42%
Transfer Curriculum	**11%**	16%	16%
Transfer	**28%**	31%	29%
Any Completion (certificate, degree, transfer)	**35%**	39%	37%
Asian-Pacific Islander			
30+ College-Level Credits	**42%**	51%	48%
Transfer Curriculum	**16%**	26%	23%
Transfer	**19%**	24%	25%
Any Completion (certificate, degree, transfer)	**30%**	36%	35%
Black			
30+ College-Level Credits	**26%**	28%	28%
Transfer Curriculum	**5%**	6%	7%
Transfer	**16%**	17%	21%
Any Completion (certificate, degree, transfer)	**22%**	23%	26%
Latino			
30+ College-Level Credits	**34%**	36%	35%
Transfer Curriculum	**9%**	11%	12%
Transfer	**11%**	13%	14%
Any Completion (certificate, degree, transfer)	**18%**	20%	22%

Most Students Who Transfer from LACCD Fail to Complete Two Years of Credit before Transferring

Our recent report, *Divided We Fail*, included analyses demonstrating that "transfer" does not mean what it has commonly been assumed to mean based on the design of California's Master Plan: the movement of students from the CCC to the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) after earning two years of credit (60 credits) toward a bachelor's degree. In fact, most students transferred without completing the curriculum or earning an associate degree, and only half of those who transferred enrolled in CSU or UC. This pattern was even stronger at LACCD - an even higher percentage of transfer students did not complete 60 credits prior to transferring.

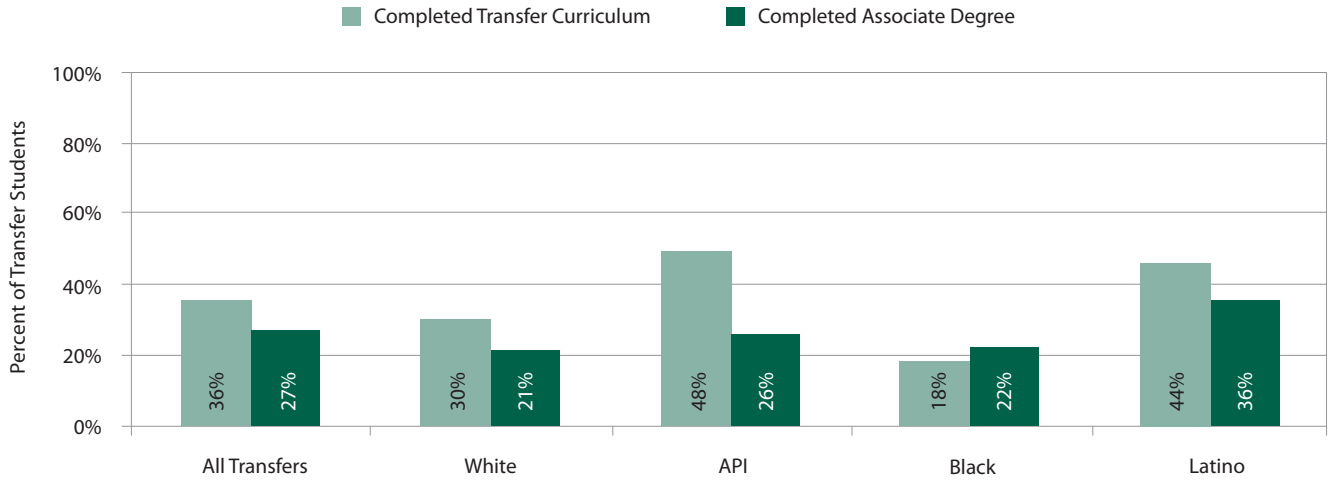
As shown in Figure 5, large numbers of students transferred well before they were prepared to begin junior-level study at a university.

- Only 36% of students in LACCD who transferred to a university had completed a transfer curriculum at the community college, which requires 60 credits; this is well below the systemwide figure of 43% and the LA County figure of 44%.
- About a quarter (27%) of LACCD transfer students earned an associate degree before transferring, similar to the figures for transfer students systemwide and in LA County.
- Black transfer students at LACCD were especially unlikely to complete a transfer curriculum, with fewer than 1 in 5 black students (18%) doing so before transferring (about 22% of black transfer students in LA County and systemwide completed a transfer curriculum).
- While Latino students were the least likely to transfer, Latino students who did transfer were more likely than most others to have completed a transfer curriculum or associate degree, similar to the pattern for Latino students in LA County and systemwide.
- Compared to white transfer students systemwide and in LA County, white transfer students in LACCD were less likely to have completed a transfer curriculum (30% in LACCD vs 39% systemwide and 38% in LA County).

Only about half (53%) of the transfers from LACCD were to one of the state's public universities. Among LACCD students who transferred (Figure 6):

- Asian-Pacific Islander and Latino students were the most likely to enroll in one of the public universities, and black students were the least likely.
- Black students were more likely to enroll in out-of-state public and private institutions (41%) than in CSU or UC

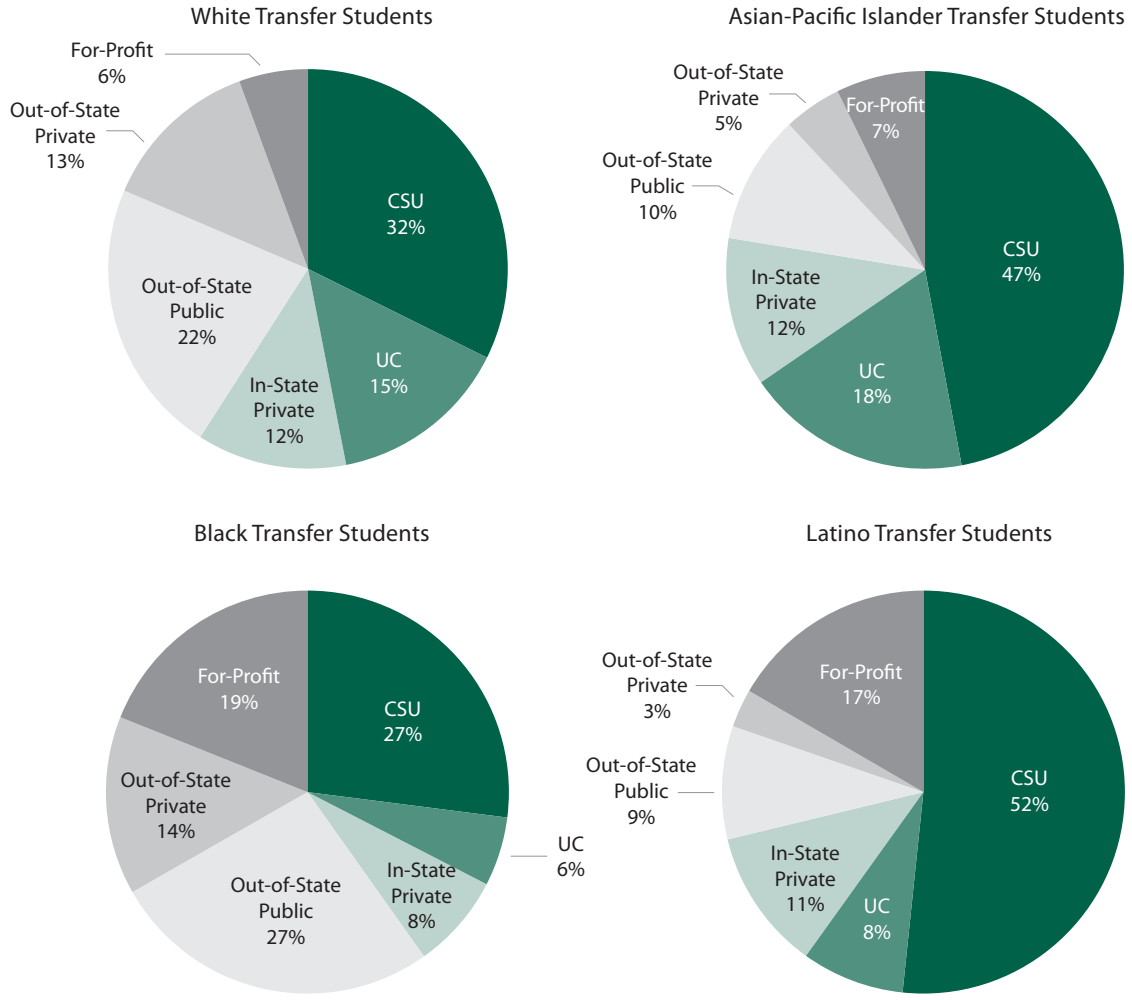
Figure 5
Most Transfer Students in LACCD Have Not Completed Two Years of Credits



(33%), and 19% of black transfer students enrolled in for-profit colleges, *more than twice the share* among API transfers and *more than three times* the share among white transfers. This pattern is cause for concern in view of serious questions about high indebtedness and low completion rates in for-profit institutions.[4]

- Latino students were the least likely to go to out-of-state institutions (12%), but nearly as high a share (17%) enrolled in for-profit colleges as was the case for black students, raising similar concerns.
- All of these patterns mirrored those for transfer students in LA County colleges and systemwide.

Figure 6
Transfer Destination for LACCD Students Varies by Race/Ethnicity; Blacks and Latinos Choose For-Profits at Much Higher Rates

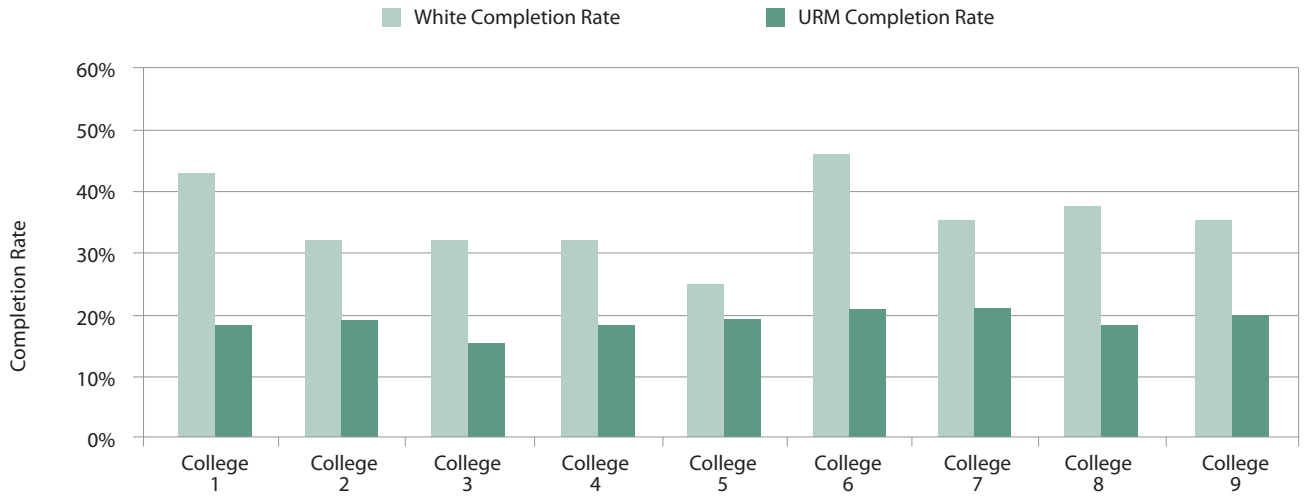


[4] Two recent articles summarizing Congressional concerns about the for-profit higher education sector and on-going investigations can be found at http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/06/24/forprofit and http://chronicle.com/article/New-Grilling-of-For-Profits/66020/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en

Outcomes for URM Students are Similar (and Poor) across the 9 LACCD Colleges

In the *Divided We Fail* report, data for a sample of individual colleges across the system revealed that the completion rate for URM students and the degree of disparity in completion rates between white and URM students varied substantially across colleges of similar size and similar demographic profile. This suggests to us that some colleges have done a better job of helping URM students succeed. Across the nine colleges of the LACCD, however, the completion rate for URM students was very similar, and uniformly poor, ranging from 16% to 21% (Figure 7). There was more variation in the completion rates for white students, which ranged from 25% to 46%. Therefore, any differences across the LACCD colleges in the degree of disparity between outcomes for white and URM students was related more to how well white students did than to the outcomes of URM students.

Figure 7
LACCD Colleges Have Similarly Poor Completion Rates for URM Students;
Differences in White-URM Disparity are Related to Differences in Completion Rate for White Students



Too Few Students Follow Successful Patterns – Racial Gaps Appear Here as Well

Academic research has clearly identified patterns that, if followed, give students a better chance of completing their academic programs. For example, students are more likely to make progress along the milestones and complete a certificate, degree, or transfer if they:

- pass college-level math and English early in their college careers
- take a college success course
- gain momentum through credit accumulation by enrolling full-time and continuously, completing at least 20 credits in the first year of enrollment, earning credits during summer terms, and avoiding excessive course withdrawals and late registration.

The differences between following and not following successful patterns can be extreme. Note the following three examples of how students who followed the successful patterns had much higher rates of completing certificates, degrees, or transferring than students who did not follow three particular patterns:

Passed college-level English within 2 years?

- Yes → 42% completed | No → 17% completed

Passed college-level math within 2 years?

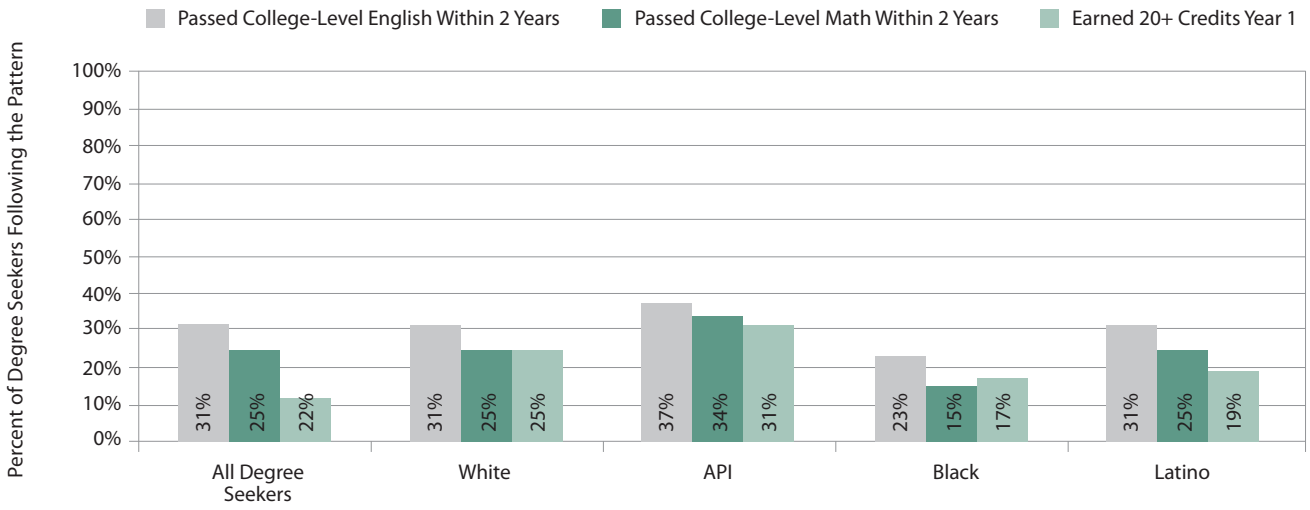
- Yes → 47% completed | No → 17% completed

Accumulated at least 20 credits in first year?

- Yes → 50% completed | No → 18% completed

The problem is, as shown in Figure 8, too few students in the LACCD (as in the CCC system as a whole) are following successful patterns. Fewer than a quarter (22%) of degree seekers earned at least 20 credits in the first year. Only a quarter of degree seekers passed at least one college-level math course within two years and only 31% passed at least one college-level English course within that time period. API students were the most likely to follow each of these patterns and black students were the least likely, the same pattern found systemwide and in LA County colleges.

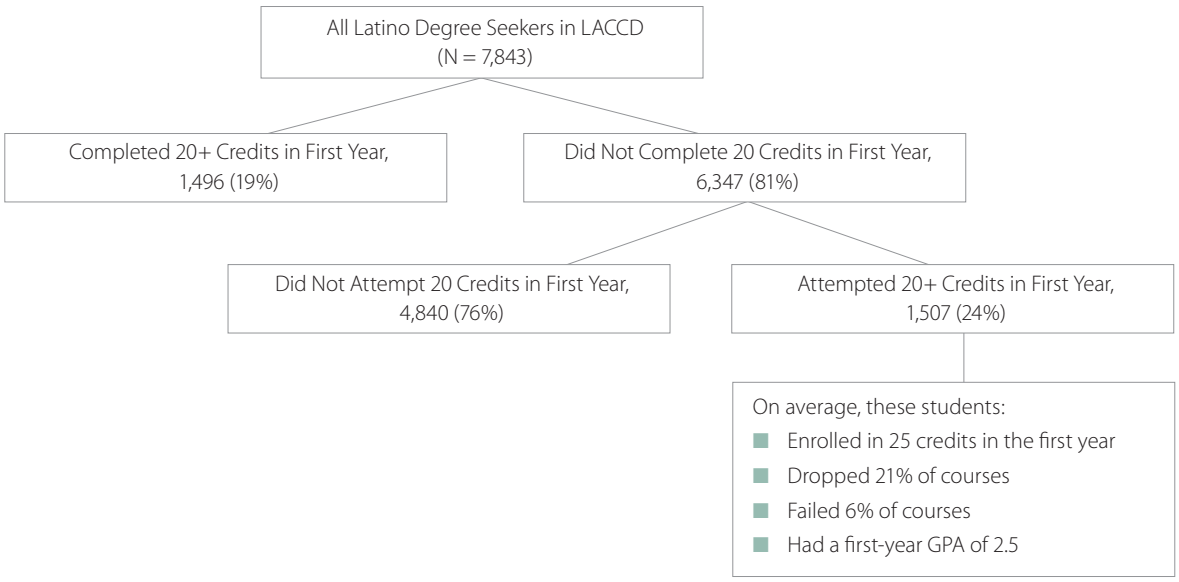
Figure 8
Few LACCD Students Follow Successful Enrollment Patterns



Patterns of Student Enrollment Provide Clues for Improvement

By monitoring student enrollment patterns, colleges may be able to identify some practices that could increase student success. For example, Figure 8 shows that Latino students in LACCD were as likely as white students to complete college-level math and English within two years of enrolling, but they were less likely to accumulate 20 credits in the first year. A further analysis of the data in Figure 9 shows that three-quarters (76%) of the Latino students who did not reach that level of credit accumulation did not even enroll in 20 credits in the first year, an issue that could be addressed through the use of college success courses, early advising, and financial aid counseling to help students understand the benefits of more full-time attendance and the options for financial aid to make that possible. For those students who are enrolling in sufficient credits in the first year, policies limiting course drops and repeats, along with early alert programs, tutoring, and other academic support programs, could increase the rate of successful course completion and raise the number of credits students are accumulating. Similar analyses of other enrollment patterns, where found to be problematic, could point to other solutions.

Figure 9
Patterns Related to Early Credit Accumulation among Latino Students in LACCD



Recommendations: Data-driven Decisions Can Improve Completion and Reduce Gaps

In the report *Divided We Fail*, we concluded that systemwide completion rates are too low and racial/ethnic disparities too high to meet the projected demand for educated workers and ensure the well-being of California. We recommended that actions to increase completion and reduce racial/ethnic disparities occur on two mutually supportive fronts: *changes to institutional practices at the college level and changes to state and system policy*. Both rely on the strategic use of data to track student milestone achievement and enrollment patterns. We recommended that the Chancellor's Office coordinate a systemwide, and systematic, effort by which cohort data are analyzed for every college. Based on these analyses, colleges should set goals for improving completion rates and reducing disparities, and should publicly report milestone data to inform stakeholder groups and policymakers, helping to focus policy agendas on those areas of greatest systemwide challenge. By using analyses of milestone attainment and student enrollment patterns, colleges can identify opportunities to better target their strategies, as the example in the previous section demonstrated.

The need to establish a data-driven culture of continuous improvement is nowhere greater than in the LACCD, where outcomes fall consistently below those found systemwide, and where demographic trends make it imperative to reduce racial/ethnic performance gaps. Among the cohort of new students enrolling in 2003-04, degree seekers in the LACCD were less likely to reach each of the intermediate milestones and the completion outcomes (with the exception of certificate completion) than those in LA County overall or statewide. **Only a quarter (25%) of all degree-seekers in LACCD completed a certificate, degree or transfer within six years of enrolling, compared to 31% across the CCC system.** LACCD's student population is among the most diverse in the CCC, but the lower rate of reaching milestones and of completing degrees and transfers is not simply related to the district's demographic profile. Rather, LACCD students of each race/ethnicity have somewhat poorer outcomes than their counterparts across the CCC system.

Examining progress in achieving intermediate outcomes and analyzing student enrollment patterns can help to diagnose where, and *which*, students are falling off the pathway to completion, and to target practices within LACCD to improve student outcomes. LACCD colleges can work with peer colleges to share effective practices and identify policies that, if changed at the system or state level, could make on-the-ground efforts by faculty and staff more effective.

Los Angeles Southwest College, one of the nine colleges of the LACCD, is participating in the Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative, a foundation-funded effort encouraging community colleges across the country to help more students succeed through changes in state policy and college practice. ATD focuses on monitoring student progress and outcomes, particularly for low-income and under-represented minority students, and using data to drive changes in policy and practice. That is precisely the strategy we recommend, although we offer a specific framework for the data analysis based on a set of common milestones and success indicators to be used across the CCC system. The participation of LA Southwest in the ATD initiative may provide helpful information for the LACCD district as a whole in its efforts to increase student success. The district's new chancellor, Dr. Daniel LaVista, is well-positioned to apply those lessons, based on his experience as the Executive Director of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, a state recognized for its efforts to improve community college student success.

We count ourselves among the many who believe that community colleges are inadequately funded for the diverse and vital missions they are expected to fulfill. But we also believe it is important, and possible, to achieve better outcomes from the resources that are available. Better use of data to inform changes in practice and policy across the community college system can help prevent serious erosion in education levels and the resulting adverse impact on the workforce, the tax base, and the quality of life. Current fiscal problems and inadequate preparation of incoming college students are huge challenges but should not stall efforts to address the significant problems at hand. Community college students are California's future workforce and we must prepare them or face an unenviable future. The colleges in the LACCD and across the state are committed to increasing student success, but their efforts will be more effective if guided by the systematic data-driven decision making that we have outlined in this report. Such a culture of continuous improvement can spur changes to practices and policies that, in combination, can increase college completion and brighten future prospects for the Los Angeles region and all of California.

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