

ccDaily > Students with associate degrees are more likely to earn baccalaureates

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Community college students who transfer to four-year colleges with an associate degree are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than similar students who transfer without one, according to a [new study](#) from the [Community College Research Center](#) (CCRC).

Nearly two thirds of community college students who transfer to four-year colleges do so without first earning an associate degree. And while more than 80 percent of all entering community college students indicate their intention to earn a baccalaureate, only 15 percent end up doing so within six years.

The analysis found that students who transferred with an associate degree had an advantage: they were 49 percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within four years, and 22 percent more likely to earn one within six years.

"Our study provides evidence that students should be encouraged to complete an associate degree before transfer, and that concomitantly, states should work on implementing policies that guarantee credit transfer for students enrolling at public four-year colleges with a degree," according to a CCRC press release.

[National Student Clearinghouse report sheds light on transfer trends](#)

Students who transfer to four-year colleges often drop out before completing a bachelor's degree. And because less than a third of them complete an associate degree before transferring, they often leave college with no degree at all.

This is the [second CCRC study](#) that highlights the benefits of earning an associate degree before transferring to a four-year college. Last summer, CCRC released a report on the economic benefits for students and states related to earning a degree before transfer.

## The role of policy

To meet national goals of increasing the number of Americans with college credentials, community colleges are increasingly encouraging students to commit to completing an associate degree. Many are even reaching out to former students who have earned enough credits to award them an associate degree.

[Colleges, universities work to smooth transfer pathways](#)

The new CCRC study indicated that policy seems to play a role in successful transfers, noting that statewide articulation agreements lead to better outcomes for transfer students. Students with degrees know they are less likely to lose credits after transferring and less likely to have to retake a course than students who transfer without a degree.

Students in the study attended colleges in a state with an articulation agreement that guarantees full "credit capture" for students who transfer to public four-years with an associate degree. The authors speculated that community college

students who transfer to public four-year colleges with credits but no degree may have difficulty receiving credit for all their classes, which can delay, and even completely derail, bachelor's degree completion.

CCRC cited a recent [City University of New York](#) study that found 42 percent of transfer students lost at least 10 percent — and sometimes all — of their accumulated community college credits. Students who were able to transfer 90 percent or more of their credits were two and half times as likely to complete a bachelor's degree as students who transferred less than half their credits, it added.

The transfer issue figures prominently in the [American Association of Community Colleges'](#) (AACC) blueprint to redesign the two-year college experience. One of the strategies noted in AACC's [21st-Century Commission report](#) calls to promote transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions through state policy stipulating that students who complete an agreed-upon core of transfer courses and earn an associate degree may transfer to junior standing at a public university without losing credits.

[N.C. college systems making student transfers easier](#)

AACC's follow-up [implementation guide](#) — released this month at the [AACC annual convention](#) — includes examples of establishing guarantees for seamless transfers and implementing automatic graduation and reverse transfer programs. Efforts at [Seminole State College of Florida](#) and [El Paso Community College](#) in Texas are featured, as well as the [Tennessee Transfer Pathways](#) program.

## Differing degrees

The CCRC study also noted that different kinds of associate degrees affect the likelihood that transfer students will attain a bachelor's degree. Associate of arts (AA) and associate of science (AS) degrees, both of which are transfer-oriented degrees, significantly increased students' likelihood of earning a baccalaureate, the study said. Students who earned an associate of applied science (AAS) degree — designed for direct entry into the workforce — were less likely than students with more than 50 college credits but no degree to complete a bachelor's degree after transferring.

CCRC added that four-year institutions also see the benefit of working with two-year colleges on transfer students to improve their own completion rates. For students in transfer-oriented programs, encouraging completion at the community college can lead to four-year college outcomes that are nearly 10 percentage points greater than comparable students who do not complete, the study said.

"Colleges should thus consider redoubling efforts to advise and encourage transfer-seeking students to earn the associate degree credential first," the report said.

## Clear communication

Community colleges need to better communicate to students and faculty the benefits of completing an associate degree, said Davis Jenkins, senior research associate at CCRC. Faculty members themselves often undervalue an associate degree and encourage students to transfer without earning a credential, he said.

[New college students can drown in a sea of choices](#)

Another reason students might not be completing a degree before transferring is because the process is confusing, even with the recent surge in articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions, Jenkins said. Students often don't understand the transfer process, general education requirements or how those general education courses related to majors, he said.

That confusion may also be the reason so many community college students are taking more credits than they need in order to graduate, Jenkins said.

Making the process more transparent and easy falls on both community colleges and their partnering four-year institutions, he said.

"It's a two-way street," he said.

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