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Associate Degrees for Transfer

Early Effects on Degree Completion in California Community Colleges

CALIFORNIA HAS EMBARKED on an important and promising policy change designed to accelerate and increase the numbers of students transferring from community colleges to earn bachelors degrees at four-year institutions. New state law requires “the California State University to guarantee admission with junior status to any community college student who meets the requirements for the associate degree for transfer (ADT).” The policy is now in its fifth year of implementation and is ripe for examination. This brief summarizes 2016 research that uses detailed state-, college- and student-level data to examine the program’s effects. Most striking are early findings that show significant growth over time in the number of associate degrees granted, anemic but growing incidence of transfer, and suggestive evidence of disparities in student uptake of the ADT opportunity.

Background and Context

Of all the pathways to a degree in higher education, transferring from a community college to a four-year school to earn a bachelor’s degree is arguably the most complex. Successful transfer requires navigating at least two separate education systems: the two-year community college the student attends and the transfer requirements of the destination four-year school. The support students receive to navigate this transfer process varies by school. Some community colleges offer substantial guidance, while others provide relatively little accessible guidance on transferring, leaving students to navigate the two systems independently. This often requires that students decipher different course numbering systems and that students understand the differing transfer requirements of a number of universities. Some community colleges provide suggested course schedules for students wanting to transfer in a given field, but unique bi-lateral agreements with each four-year college can mean that a student seeking to be eligible for transfer to more than one university will need to fulfill a number of sets of transfer requirements.

TOPLINES

- > Since first implemented in 2011, ADTs have increased the number of students earning associate degrees in California Community Colleges.
- > Transfer rates are beginning to increase, though they have not climbed as significantly as the number of associate degrees granted.
- > Early data suggest differential uptake of the ADT opportunity across student subgroups and raise concerns about equity.

California is the first state to have both the data and variation in implementation necessary to examine the effects of statewide transfer agreements.

Some states have simplified this complex structure by establishing statewide transfer agreements that streamline the transfer process between all two- and four-year schools in the state. These agreements vary from relatively basic (common course numbering) to relatively robust (curricula specifically for students intending to transfer, which are accepted as transfer coursework at all four-year universities). While such statewide agreements are intuitively appealing, their success is relatively untested; California is the first state to have both the data and variation in implementation necessary to examine the effects of statewide transfer agreements.

Associate Degrees for Transfer

Until recently, the California Community College (CCC) system provided an archetypal example of complex transfer processes. Each of the 113 colleges set its own requirements for graduation with a degree in each discipline and each CSU determined how and whether to accept CCC transfer students. Pairs of schools created individual campus-to-campus agreements that were complex and highly variable.

This often confusing system was associated with a number of troubling patterns. First, relatively few students who stated that they wanted to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree ever did. Second, of those who did successfully transfer, only about one quarter of community college students had first earned an AA and most transferred with far more credits than necessary. Finally, many students who transferred left the four-year university without ever earning a degree.

In the fall of 2011, CCC started offering associate degrees for transfer (ADTs)—degree programs based on model curricula that were created jointly between the CCC and CSU systems. ADTs follow a set curriculum at every CCC and are accepted at all CSUs that offer a similar degree. Students who successfully earn an ADT are guaranteed admission to the CSU system (though not necessarily their first choice campus), are granted junior standing, and only need to complete an additional 60 credits to earn a BA. This statewide reform greatly reduced the complexity of the transfer process for students.

In the five years since ADTs were first offered, their availability has grown substantially, from 133 ADT pathways in 2011 to 2,079 in 2016. This gradual rollout of ADTs was a function of the multi-layered process by which the degrees needed to be approved. All CCCs now offer ADTs. These degrees are available in 36 disciplines, from Animal Science to English to Geology.

The goals of ADTs are threefold:

1. to increase the number of students earning associate degrees on their way to a bachelor's degree,
2. to increase efficiency in the system (by reducing the number of unnecessary credits taken), and
3. to increase the number of students who transfer and earn bachelor's degrees.

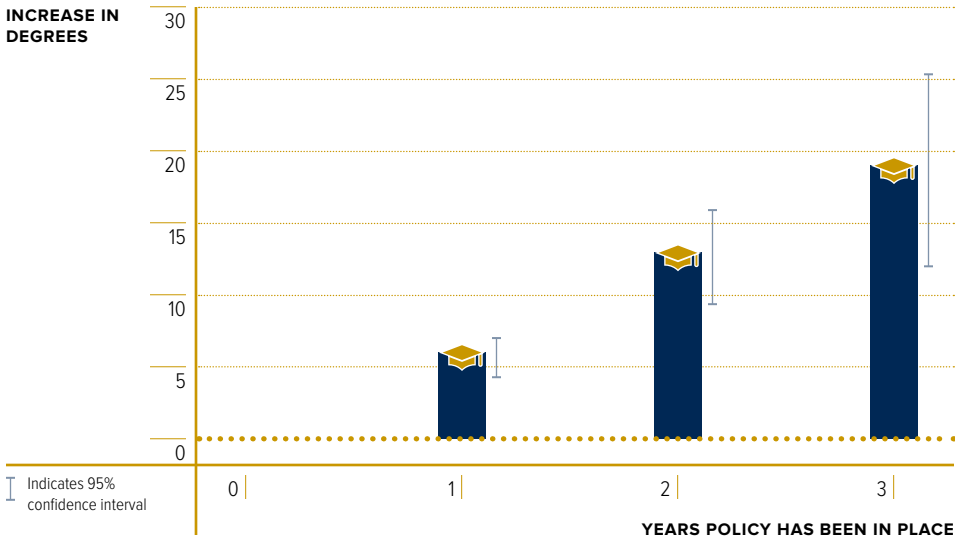
Findings

Number of degrees

The introduction of ADTs had large effects on the number of degrees granted in departments that offer the degrees. In the third year of the program, majors with ADTs granted an average of 20 more associate degrees (associate and ADTs combined) per year

than they had before the introduction of ADTs (which is an increase of almost 40%). This is a significant increase in degrees granted and shows that the program is achieving one of its desired effects. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Average Change in Degrees Per Department



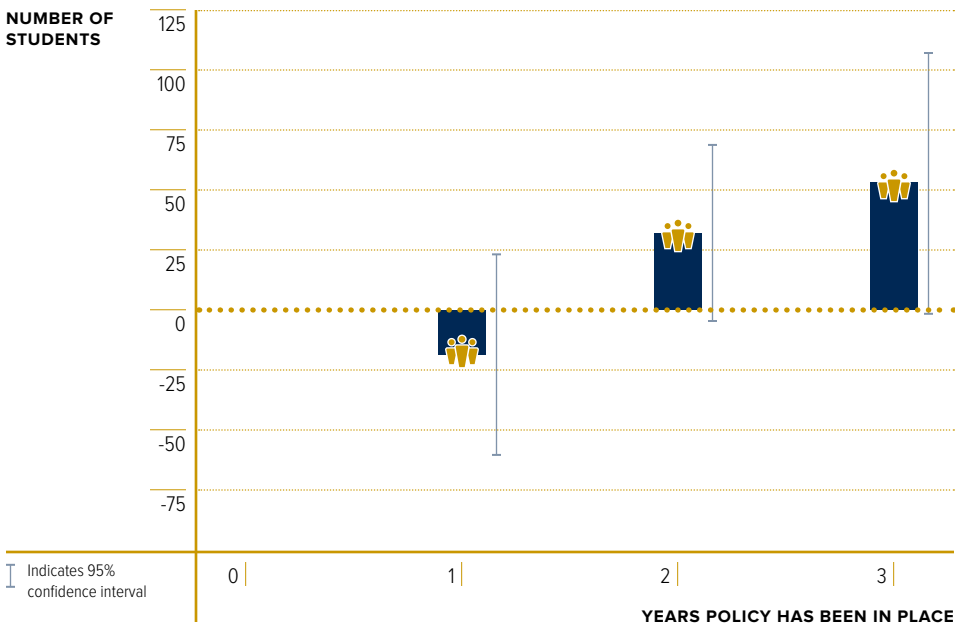
Model predicts number of degrees granted in departments as a function of a treatment variable and interacted fixed effects (college, department and year).

Because the program is still in its infancy, these early effects could prove to be long lasting and stable, they could prove temporary as the system reaches a new equilibrium, or they could provide evidence of policy adjustments and fine tuning that may be needed to shape the rollout in a way that moves the system closer to desired outcomes.

Number of students who transfer

The number of students who transfer did not change significantly, but there is suggestive evidence that this is changing over time with the effect growing each year. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Average Change in Number of Students Who Transfer, Per College



Model predicts number of students who transfer as a function of a treatment variable, college, fixed effects and year fixed effects.

DATA AND METHODS

This brief is based on a study that used publicly available data from the California Community College Chancellor's Office to examine the number of associate degrees granted and the number of students who successfully transfer each year. The phased rollout of ADTs across departments, across schools, and over time was leveraged to identify the effect of the program. This means that unrelated trends in enrollment and degree granting at particular colleges, in particular departments, or in particular years are accounted for and the actual effects of the program are identified. The size and complexity of the CCC system, along with the phased rollout of these programs, enable a rigorous evaluation of the effects of a statewide transfer degree program. In addition, student-level transcript data from one CCC district were examined to determine if certain groups of students took advantage of this program at higher rates than others.

Student uptake

Student-level data from a sample community college district provide suggestive evidence of differential uptake by student group. There is evidence that:

- classes that count for ADTs are in high demand.
- students might face difficulty in accessing these classes.
- high achieving students take the classes at higher rates than their peers.

Considerations

At the time of this study, data were only available from three years into policy implementation. This is an especially important time to study a new program of such significance. The early nature of this analysis may provide policy makers, administrators, and faculty with preliminary feedback for improvement. It can also guide future research by highlighting important questions to follow as the policy unfolds. These include:

1. *Do ADTs meaningfully increase the number of CCC students who successfully transfer to CSUs?*
2. *Do ADTs meaningfully increase the number of CCC students who successfully earn BAs?*
3. *Do certain groups of students take advantage of ADTs at higher rates? Is that pattern of program take-up exacerbating existing gaps in educational attainment?*

Because the program is still in its infancy, these early effects could prove to be long lasting and stable, they could prove temporary as the system reaches a new equilibrium, or they could provide evidence of policy adjustments and fine tuning that may be needed to shape the rollout in a way that moves the system closer to desired outcomes. Future years of data, and close attention to effects for particular groups of students, will provide additional guidance for policymakers and community colleges as the ADT program grows and evolves. Importantly, future work will also look at whether ADT increased efficiency towards the bachelor's degree once students transferred to a CSU.

This brief was written by Rachel Baker, Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California, Irvine, and is based on her research.

Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research was established in 2016 to support California community college leaders through annual professional learning institutes and independent, actionable research on relevant topics and trends. Wheelhouse is supported by the University of California, Davis, the Hearst Foundations, the Foundation for California Community Colleges and the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences. Housed at the UC Davis School of Education, the Wheelhouse Institute on Leadership will welcome its first cohort of participants in January 2017.

¹ Senate Bill 1440 was approved by the Legislature and signed by Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. in 2010.

² There could be a number of reasons for the lack of a robust finding here, including:

1. Not enough data yet to examine this outcome, as the students who took advantage of the policy in the first years may have been those who would have transferred anyway.
2. The policy has not reduced some important barriers for students— not all ADTs are accepted at all CSU campuses and the modest GPA bump given with the ADT may not be enough to gain acceptance to a local campus. Future years of data will allow us to examine this question more closely.

³ Analyses from the sample district shows that students who have been enrolled for more terms were more likely to enroll in classes that count for ADTs. The data used in this study are from years in which the colleges in the sample district used accumulated credits to determine registration priority; if classes were filling up, students who had been enrolled longer would have priority and would be able to enroll in these classes first.