

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Bachelor's Degree Attainment:
Catholic Colleges and Universities Lead the Way



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Bachelor's Degree Attainment: Catholic Colleges and Universities Lead the Way

Introduction

Catholic colleges and universities have an impressive record in helping students attain a baccalaureate degree. Although Catholic colleges and universities have completion rates similar to their private four-year college peers, students who begin at Catholic institutions tend to stay enrolled in their initial institution and reap the benefits of more rapid degree completion than students in other sectors of higher education. These findings add to the insights from an important report, *Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates*, that was released in November 2012 by the research center of the National Student Clearinghouse.

Whether and how quickly students obtain a bachelor's degree is an important question for both the individual and the larger world of higher education. The costs associated with an additional year or two of college and the loss of income from a delayed career start are substantial. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the average cost of a year of education, after scholarships and grants, at a four-year public campus is \$12,800 and at a four-year private institution is \$22,620.¹

This brief report uses tables provided by the National Student Clearinghouse to do two things. First, the data illustrate the path of students who enrolled in Catholic institutions for the first time in fall 2006, showing what proportion of them completed a degree, from what type of institution, and how quickly. Second, the report contrasts degree attainment rates at Catholic colleges and universities with other private, public, and for-profit institutions.

¹ National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics, Table 354.5. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_01g.asp. Figures given are for four-year institutions during the 2010–11 academic year. Students who attend an average private nonprofit institution and who graduate in four years will invest \$90,480 in their education. Students who attend a public university and graduate in *six* years make an investment of \$73,680. Therefore the graduate of the private nonprofit university needs to earn only \$16,800 during the two years after graduation to compensate for the higher cost of the private nonprofit campus.

Bachelor's Degree Attainment at Catholic Colleges and Universities

What becomes of the students who initially enroll in a U.S. Catholic college or university? Data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show how students who began in a Catholic institution in 2006 fared. Table 1 (next page) shows undergraduate degree attainment rates for students after four, five, and six years of study. Students who began and remained at a Catholic college in 2006 had significant degree attainment rates, with 48.4 percent achieving a degree from their original institution within four years, and 56.8 percent graduating with a degree in six years. Completion rates for those who began as first-time, full-time students (more than half the cohort) are higher.

Among the students who matriculated in fall 2006, those who transferred into a Catholic college or university also showed a high degree of success in completing their studies within four to six years. Of course, transfers have credits that allowed them move promptly toward a degree (see sidebar, below).

Parts A and C of Table 1 show students who remained at their original institution and reveal that those who began at a Catholic institution generally persisted to graduation. At the end of four years, 64.5 percent of them had either earned a degree from their original institution (48.4 percent) or were still enrolled there (16.1 percent).

Parts A and B of Table 1 together show the total rate of degree attainment regardless of institution and show that 54.2 percent of first-year students had completed in four years and 69.8 percent had completed by their sixth year. Part-time students (about 9 percent of the group) were both most likely to transfer and, not surprisingly, took longer to complete their degree.

Transfer Students: A Fresh Perspective

The National Student Clearinghouse findings offer a fresh and positive view of U.S. college graduation rates by solving a problem that has dogged research using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from the National Center for Educational Statistics – the inability to know what happens to students who leave their initial institution. Clearinghouse evidence shows significantly higher degree attainment rates than the IPEDS data. Their statistics confirm that large differences exist across the public, private, and for-profit sectors of higher education, and between two-year and four-year institutions. Those who enroll as first-time, full-time students have a much higher likelihood of completing a degree than those who begin part time, regardless of sector.

When students do not stay at their first college or university, it matters whether they transfer to another institution or leave higher education altogether. Students leave their initial institution for many reasons: a mismatch between program offerings and changing student interests, financial difficulties in meeting tuition and other costs, a perceived lack of “fit” to the campus, the choices of friends, and so on. Some students do find that college is “not for them” or that the academic expectations of the campus exceed their ability or willingness to commit. Attrition from one campus, however, does not necessarily mean that the student will not complete a degree elsewhere. Still, the transfer process can slow the ultimate attainment of a degree because of differences in academic requirements or personal adjustments that may be needed.

Part E of Table 1 shows a final, important point. These are the students who are essentially lost to higher education. They have neither earned a degree nor were they enrolled by the end of the study period. While students who enrolled at a Catholic college as first-time, full-time students have the highest rate of degree attainment, a larger proportion of part-time students had left higher education without a degree.

Table 1: Degree-Seeking Students at Catholic Four-Year Colleges and Universities: Fall 2006 Cohort (percentage)

| Fall 2006 Entering Cohort: (N=133,179) | Four-Year Outcomes: 2009–10 | Five-Year Outcomes: 2010–11 | Six-Year Outcomes: 2011–12 |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>A. Earned degree from original institution</i> | | | |
| All Entering, Degree Seeking | 48.4 | 55.0 | 56.8 |
| First-Time, Full-Time (N=74,517) | 52.6 | 61.0 | 62.9 |
| First-Time, Part-Time (N=11,889) | 15.2 | 19.0 | 20.8 |
| Transfer-In, Full-Time (N=35,381) | 56.7 | 61.5 | 62.9 |
| <i>B. Transferred, earned degree from different institution</i> | | | |
| All Entering, Degree Seeking | 5.8 | 10.5 | 13.0 |
| First-Time, Full-Time | 5.2 | 9.7 | 11.6 |
| First-Time, Part-Time | 2.7 | 16.4 | 27.4 |
| Transfer-In, Full-Time | 7.1 | 9.9 | 11.3 |
| <i>C. Not graduated, still enrolled at original institution</i> | | | |
| All Entering, Degree Seeking | 16.1 | 5.6 | 2.4 |
| First-Time, Full-Time | 18.7 | 5.6 | 1.9 |
| First-Time, Part-Time | 12.8 | 6.8 | 4.0 |
| Transfer-In, Full-Time | 12.2 | 4.2 | 1.9 |
| <i>D. Transferred, still enrolled at different institution</i> | | | |
| All Entering, Degree Seeking | 14.6 | 10.1 | 7.2 |
| First-Time, Full-Time | 13.1 | 8.9 | 6.6 |
| First-Time, Part-Time | 38.6 | 24.9 | 13.2 |
| Transfer-In, Full-Time | 10.2 | 7.7 | 6.1 |
| <i>E. Not graduated, not transferred, no longer enrolled</i> | | | |
| All Entering, Degree Seeking | 15.2 | 18.9 | 20.6 |
| First-Time, Full-Time | 10.3 | 14.8 | 16.9 |
| First-Time, Part-Time | 30.7 | 32.9 | 34.6 |
| Transfer-In, Full-Time | 13.9 | 16.8 | 17.7 |

Note: Student enrollment and degree counts are included through the first degree awarded by a four-year institution.

Subsequent enrollment and degrees earned by four-year graduates are not counted.

Degree seeking includes only those students who either (a) enrolled full time for at least one term within the first year, or (b) enrolled at least half time for two terms within the first 1.5 years.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Sector Comparisons

Do students who start out in Catholic institutions complete degrees at a rate on par with their peers in other higher education institutions? Table 2 (next page) presents data showing that, indeed, a larger proportion of students who enroll in Catholic colleges and universities attain a degree *and* do so sooner than their peers at other institutions. Degree completion rates for students who begin their academic career at Catholic institutions in 2006 are similar to those at other private, four-year colleges—about 54 percent (Catholic enrollees are included in the private, four-year figure)—but have a much higher four-year completion rate than students who enrolled at public institutions—39 percent.

Table 2: Bachelor’s Degree Attainment, by Time to Completion and Sector: Fall 2006 Cohort (percentage)

| | Four Years | | | Five Years | | | Six Years | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | At Original Institution | At Different Institution | Total | At Original Institution | At Different Institution | Total | At Original Institution | At Different Institution | Total |
| <i>A. All Entering Students</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| Public, Four-Year (N=1,497,257) | 34.1 | 4.9 | 39.0 | 46.0 | 8.7 | 54.7 | 49.4 | 10.9 | 60.3 |
| For-Profit (N=107,109) | 26.5 | 2.3 | 28.8 | 29.3 | 3.8 | 33.1 | 30.3 | 4.9 | 35.2 |
| *Private, Four-Year (N= 615,162) | 48.4 | 5.4 | 53.8 | 55.1 | 9.0 | 64.8 | 56.9 | 11.8 | 68.7 |
| Catholic (N=133,179) | 48.4 | 5.8 | 54.2 | 55.0 | 10.5 | 65.5 | 56.8 | 13.0 | 69.8 |
| <i>B. First-Year, Full-Time</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| Public, Four-Year (N=742,571) | 32.2 | 4.9 | 37.1 | 49.0 | 7.5 | 56.5 | 53.4 | 9.4 | 62.8 |
| For-Profit (N=39,272) | 27.2 | 1.5 | 28.7 | 30.3 | 2.6 | 32.9 | 31.1 | 3.6 | 34.7 |
| *Private, Four-Year (N= 346,922) | 52.1 | 4.6 | 56.7 | 60.4 | 8.8 | 69.2 | 62.4 | 10.6 | 73.0 |
| Catholic (N=74,179) | 52.6 | 5.2 | 57.8 | 61.0 | 9.7 | 70.7 | 62.9 | 11.6 | 74.5 |
| <i>C. First-Year, Part-Time</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| Public, Four-Year (N=164,103) | 9.0 | 2.9 | 11.9 | 13.0 | 10.1 | 23.1 | 15.6 | 16.0 | 31.6 |
| For-Profit (N=9,681) | 11.2 | 1.6 | 12.8 | 14.3 | 2.9 | 17.2 | 15.4 | 4.0 | 19.4 |
| *Private, Four-Year (N=43,437) | 15.5 | 3.8 | 19.3 | 19.1 | 14.7 | 33.8 | 20.9 | 22.3 | 43.2 |
| Catholic (N=11,889) | 15.2 | 2.7 | 17.9 | 19.0 | 16.4 | 35.4 | 20.8 | 27.4 | 48.2 |
| <i>D. Transfer-In, Full-Time</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| Public, Four-Year (N=457,480) | 32.9 | 2.8 | 35.7 | 35.4 | 4.4 | 39.8 | 36.3 | 5.6 | 41.9 |
| For-Profit (N=45,604) | 26.5 | 2.3 | 28.8 | 29.3 | 3.8 | 33.1 | 30.3 | 4.9 | 35.2 |
| *Private, Four-Year (N= 178,371) | 55.1 | 6.8 | 61.9 | 60.1 | 9.7 | 69.8 | 61.5 | 11.1 | 72.6 |
| Catholic (N=35,381) | 56.7 | 7.1 | 63.8 | 61.5 | 9.9 | 71.4 | 62.9 | 11.3 | 74.2 |

Note: *Private, Four-Year* includes Catholic institutions.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Although public universities do narrow the gap with Catholic institutions over time, even in the sixth year, degree attainment among Catholic college and university students is about 10 percentage points higher. Degree completion among those who started in Catholic higher education remains higher even among students who transferred from their original institution. The positive pattern of degree attainment is found across all three subsets of the data. Even the relatively few students in the cohort who began part-time at a Catholic institution show impressive rates of degree completion, although often at a different institution and over a longer time period. The table also demonstrates that students who transfer into Catholic institutions (Part D) attain degrees at rates much higher than their peers who transfer to public or for-profit campuses.

In summary, the data from the National Student Clearinghouse show that Catholic institutions have an impressive record in graduating students with undergraduate degrees at a significantly higher rate than other higher education institutions. While Catholic college and university completion rates are similar to those at other private four-year institutions, the data show that those who begin at Catholic institutions tend to stay enrolled in their initial institution and reap the benefits of more rapid degree completion. This results in reduced costs associated with college expenses, as well as an earlier entry into the job market. Even students who began at a Catholic institution and then transferred had degree attainment rates well beyond those of students who initially enrolled in public or for-profit institutions.

For complete information about the study referenced here, see National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Signature Report #4, "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates," November 2012, available from <http://www.studentclearinghouse.info/signature/4/>. The Catholic college and university analysis conducted by ACCU includes 133,179 entering students from 162 institutions who enrolled in 2006. This constitutes 6 percent of all students who enrolled in any participating institution for the first time in 2006.

The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities expresses its appreciation to the National Student Clearinghouse for the data presented here. The discussion and interpretation is solely the responsibility of ACCU. Please direct any questions to Dr. Thomas Mans, Vice President, at tmans@accunet.org.



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