PACE

COMMENTARY

Postsecondary Co-Enrollment and Baccalaureate Completion

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In recent years, postsecondary co-enrollment has become a noteworthy attendance pattern among many college students. Co-enrollment at the postsecondary level refers to simultaneous enrollment in two or more colleges during the same academic term. Many colleges and universities now offer such co-enrollment programs and options. In California, for example, if students decide to attend any of the state's community or four-year colleges, they can enroll simultaneously at any UC or CSU campus without going through a typical admissions process. This means that undergraduate students at UC–Riverside may enroll at another UC institution during the same academic session as long as they meet UCR's college enrollment and academic performance requirements.

Research on the link between co-enrollment and baccalaureate completion is limited. In particular, prior empirical work has not addressed different forms of co-enrollment such as attending institutions of the same level (lateral co-enrollment) and co-enrolling at two- and four-year institutions (vertical co-enrollment). In this study, our research investigates these two types of co-enrollment and their respective relationship with baccalaureate degree progression and completion among two student populations: students beginning at four-year institutions and their baccalaureate-aspiring counterparts beginning at community colleges.

Based on analyses of the most recent longitudinal datasets on beginning postsecondary students, our study indicates that vertical co-enrollment was positively associated with baccalaureate attainment and persistence among both students beginning at four-year institutions and baccalaureate-aspiring community college beginners. On the other hand, lateral co-enrollment did not seem to affect attainment and persistence across both groups of students. These results have some relevant policy implications for higher education in California, particularly considering how extensive the state two- and four-year college system is and the number of students it serves.

First, the benefit of vertical co-enrollment in bachelor's degree completion for the community college students in our study illustrates the significance of this attendance pattern in facilitating the upward transfer process to four-year institutions. For these students, co-enrollment at a four-year institution may facilitate a smooth transition to a four-year college and ultimately successful baccalaureate attainment. In light of this benefit, community and four-year colleges in California should continue to strengthen their collaborative efforts, especially in the area of course articulation so that their students can move seamlessly through upward transfer.

Second, the clearly positive impact of co-enrolling at a community college among beginning four-year students underscores the significant contribution of community colleges in baccalaureate attainment of all students. In California, the community college system prides itself in being an option for students who desire a more cost-effective education. A growing number of four-year

college students from low-income and middle class families are looking for affordable and effective course-taking options to decrease the overall financial burden of attaining a baccalaureate degree. It is important for California's community colleges to recognize this important responsibility and continue to help co-enrolled students from their four-year counterparts to obtain the necessary and applicable coursework for a baccalaureate.

Finally, researchers and policymakers alike should support and conduct additional inquiry into other facets related to co-enrollment and its different forms. For example, understanding the types of courses (i.e., general education, major-specific) students are co-enrolling in and why they choose these courses would help postsecondary institutions in California gain information as to how and why these co-enrolled students are navigating coursework across institutions. Such knowledge would inform both community and four-year colleges in better serving co-enrollees and possibly targeting certain classes and programs.

The full study can be found in Xueli Wang and Kelly Wickersham, Postsecondary Co-enrollment and Baccalaureate Completion: A Look at Both Beginning 4-Year College Students and Baccalaureate Aspirants Beginning at Community Colleges, Research in Higher Education, November 2013. The study is one of the 2013 Charles F. Elton Best Paper Award winners of the Association for Institutional Research.

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