



How Do Institutional Type and Transfer Affect Contemporary College Students' Degree Attainment?

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Abstract

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Introduction

Students aged 18-to-24 comprise a decreasing but critical share of college students today (Pusser et al., 2007) and at community colleges specifically (Rosenberg, 2016). The “traditional” undergraduate student has been the exception, rather than the rule, for almost thirty years (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002). Nevertheless, their narratives remain overrepresented in U.S. higher education theory, research, and practice (see e.g., Maralani, 2011).

As undergraduate enrollments in community colleges climb from students of all ages, this sector is especially well-positioned to serve undergraduate students over the age of 24—who presently make up 60% of the undergraduate student population (Soares et al., 2019). These *contemporary students*—typically labeled non-traditional, post-traditional, or adult undergraduates—are more likely than their 18 to 24-year-old counterparts to hold additional identities historically underserved by postsecondary education: racially minoritized, single

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parent/guardians, women (Kasworm, 2018; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). They are more affected by the external environment beyond the college environment than their younger peers, including their commute, opportunities to transfer, and supports (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Moreover, contemporary students increase their cumulative risk of dropping out of college when they work during enrollment or delay entry to college—even if in some cases, they did so to secure economic incentives as a financial independent (Denning, 2018).

Problematically, students are less likely to vertically transfer from community colleges as they age. Contemporary students who successfully transfer from two- to four-year institutions match their younger peers academically and benefit from their maturity, work experience, and life skills such as caring for dependent family members (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Contemporary students who successfully transfer from a two-year college into four-year institutions may lose credits along the way, extending their degree completion timeline and financial strain (Dougherty, 2009; Soares et al., 2019). Soares and colleagues (2019) suggest the first step to promoting contemporary students' success is to “map who they are and what they need” (p. 22). Our brief contributes to research on contemporary student success and calls for greater empirical attention to this population's community college degree pathways.

Research Description

Methods

Our analytic samples use the full six-year data panel (2004-2009) from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study, aligning with the six-year average graduation rate for bachelor's degree-seeking students. We investigate the degree attainment of adult students

enrolling in degree-granting institutions (N=14,320).¹ The dependent variable is *degree attainment* in six years, which includes certificate, associate, and/or bachelor’s degree. We inclusively reach beyond the three-year expectation of degree completion for community college students (Bailey et al., 2005; Choy, 2002). In keeping with prior literature, *contemporary student* is a dichotomous variable indicating the age of 24 or older at first enrollment (Kasworm, 2018; Soares et al., 2019). Key covariates include *transfer status*, *institution type* (*four-year=reference*), *first-generation status*, and *income status*. Control variables include students’ self-reported *biological sex*, *race*, and transcript-reported *grade point average*.

Research Questions and Analyses

We investigate factors that may enhance contemporary students’ six-year degree attainment. The questions guiding this study are as follows: (1) What factors predict degree attainment? (2) To what extent does age predict degree attainment? (3) Does degree attainment for contemporary-aged students differ by institutional type? (4) Does degree attainment for contemporary-aged students differ by transfer status? We used three logistic regression models to assess these questions. Odds ratios and predicted probabilities are reported, indicating students’ estimated chances of attaining degrees, where π represents a vector of *controls* that includes race, gender, and GPA. To ease interpretation, we report key post-estimation findings as figures.

Model 1. $P(\text{attain}=1|x)_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{traditional age}_i + \beta_2 \text{first generation} + \beta_3 \text{low-income}_i + \beta_4 \text{transfer}_i + \beta_5 \text{institution type}_i + \pi_1 \text{controls}_i + \varepsilon_i$ (RQ 1&2)

Model 2. $P(\text{attain}=1|x)_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{traditional age}_i + \beta_2 \text{first generation} + \beta_3 \text{low-income}_i + \beta_4 \text{transfer}_i + \beta_5 \text{institution type}_i + \beta_6 \text{age*institution type}_i + \pi_1 \text{controls}_i + \varepsilon_i$ (RQ 3)

¹ Given our focus, the analytic sample excludes students under age 18 (N=250), those who did not attend degree-granting institutions (N=820), and specialized or for-profit institutions (N=530). Panel and bootstrap replicate weights (wtc000-200) are used to enhance generalizability to the national population.

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$$\text{Model 3. } P(\text{attain}=1|x)_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ traditional age}_i + \beta_2 \text{ first generation} + \beta_3 \text{ low-income}_i + \beta_4 \text{ transfer}_i + \beta_5 \text{ institution type}_i + \beta_6 \text{ age*transfer}_i + \pi_1 \text{ controls}_i + \varepsilon_i \text{ (RQ4)}$$

Results**RQ1: Predicting Degree Attainment**

Figure 1 indicates age and institutional type are the most negative predictors of degree attainment ($p < .001$ for both). Age and institution type are key predictors. Contemporary students have 55.8% lower odds of earning degrees six years after first enrollment than their younger peers. For institutional type, students starting in a two-year college have 61.9% lower odds than their peers initially starting in four-year colleges. As shown, degree attainment is negatively associated with being a first-generation college student and being low-income in particular ($p < .001$ for both). Additionally, the effect of racial identity is mixed. Meanwhile, community college women are more likely to earn degrees than their male peers.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

RQ2-4: Contemporary Aged Students and Degree Attainment

Figure 2 reports findings from the interaction models focused on institution type and transfer – Models 2 and 3. While traditional-aged students who begin college at four-year schools have the highest probability of earning degrees (66.5%), older students at the same institutions have only a 31.6% probability—comparable to the probability of students at two-year institutions (30.0%). Age distinctions have less effect among two-year college enrollees than four-year college enrollees. Notably, contemporary students experience a near-identical probability of degree attainment at less-than-two-year institutions (62.4%) as compared with traditional students (62.0%). Turning to transfer, Figure 2 shows its effect is not particularly meaningful among younger, traditional-aged students. However, the interaction between

contemporary age and transfer is positive and highly significant ($p<.000$). Among students who transfer at least once, contemporary-aged students have nearly a 50.7% predicted probability of earning degrees, nearly as high as their traditional-aged peers (53.5%).

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Implications for Community College Practice, Policy, and/or Research

Older students are the contemporary norm in community college, and yet research and practice too often focus elsewhere, potentially hindering potential innovation in how to better support their ambitions. We argue that researchers and institutions need to center contemporary students, to open pathways to economic mobility for older (and often marginalized) students (Denning, 2018; Quarles et al., 2020). Our study is limited in scope, but its findings underscore the unique educational trajectories of contemporary students, substantiate a potential age penalty, and highlight probable predictors of success. Notably, contemporary students often have distinct work and family responsibilities which can constrain their college participation (e.g., Vilhauer et al., 2020), even in community colleges which tend to offer greater flexibility (Rosenberg, 2016). Despite these obstacles, research has illustrated contemporary students’ maturity, experience, and motivation to pursue degrees and career advancement (e.g., Pusser et al., 2007).

Together, research *and* practice can inform better support structures for contemporary students. For researchers, we recommend a more detailed examination of transfer patterns for contemporary students (direction and timing) and inclusive definitions of degree completion, including certificates (see Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). Articulation agreements between institutions help credits transfer from (less-than-two and) two- to four-year degree programs, limiting lost time and costs from repeating credits (Anderson et al., 2009). They can also support non-traditional students’ need for flexible course schedules and cost effectiveness – important

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factors for older learners who might be caring for dependents or working while enrolled (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Rosenberg, 2016).

For practitioners, we recommend examining higher education structures and expanding resources beyond the projected relevancy for traditional-aged students. Community colleges attract contemporary students through their history of accessibility and affordability. Additionally, community colleges are more skilled in the understanding of contemporary student needs in comparison to four-year institutions. As stated in the results, these bonuses in support did not yield degree success for the students in our study. Above and beyond transfer policies, community colleges might consider how to structure financial and social supports to enhance graduation for contemporary students – adult learners with strong potential to successfully complete postsecondary degrees (Cox & Ebberts, 2010; Pearson, 2019).

Structural supports can take the form of enhanced information systems that alert students when they are a mere 2-3 courses away from a degree, articulation agreements for all transfer directions to support contemporary students who may need to swirl between institutions to finish their degree, and even lengthening the time that courses can be transferred, by offering low or no cost refreshers so that students can continue onward instead of retaking courses. For readers, we offer the following guided questions for policy and practice: Has your institution reviewed retention and completion trends by age? Further, *within* the contemporary student population, are there demographic trends (e.g., gender, race, transfer status) that warrant attention, celebration, or alarm? Just as our research prompted more curiosity, we hope this process will greatly inform your practice to the benefit of contemporary student success.

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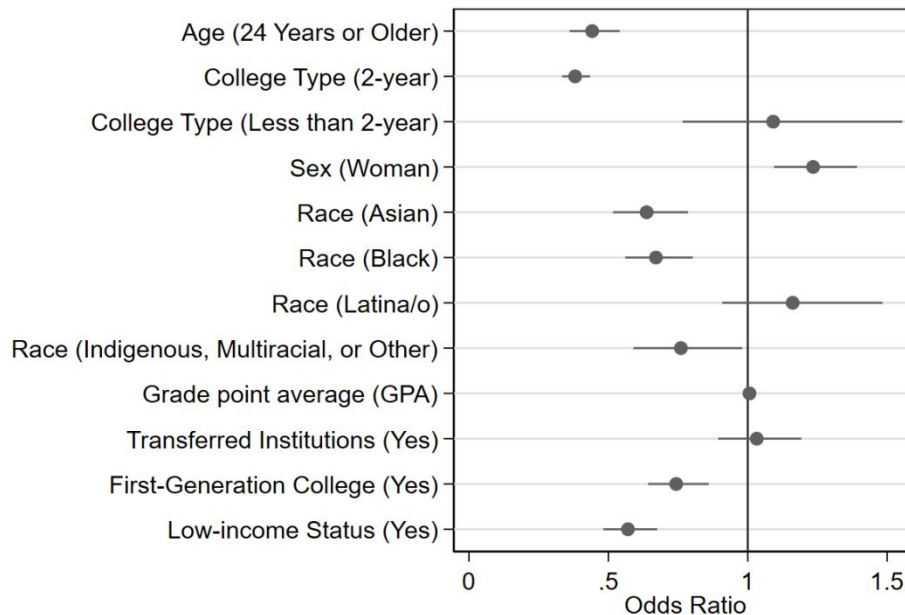
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FIGURES

Figure 1*Degree Attainment Predictors***Figure 2***Probability of Degree Attainment, by Model*