

Helping Students Cross the Finish Line

Partnering Regionally and Across Systems to
Increase Bachelor's Degree Completion

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**COLLEGE
FUTURES**
FOUNDATION

*More Graduates for a
Thriving California*

COORDINATION AND COLLEGE ATTAINMENT

In the 2008 Summer Olympic Games held in Beijing, the women's relay team from the United States was winning its 4 x 100-meter heat when a mix-up at the last handover sent the baton tumbling to the track. The mistake cost the team a chance at a gold medal and sent a reminder to all coaches and young relay teams—to practice and perfect the exchange as well as the sprint.

Education is similar to a relay race in at least one way: Supporting students' pursuit of a bachelor's degree requires the combined and coordinated efforts of multiple institutions along the way. We've known for years that the handoffs between education systems—from high school to college and from community college to four-year universities—pose serious challenges to student progress. California is taking some steps to smooth the transitions across its public systems. Two examples are the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, intended to help more high school students prepare for college, and the creation of the associate degree for transfer, intended to assure that more community college students can retain all their college credits after they transfer to a state university. But California is still losing large numbers of students at key transitions along the path to a college degree.

For example, a student named Oscar¹ graduated from a public high school in the San Joaquin Valley and enrolled in a local community college as a first step toward earning a four-year degree. The college administered a placement exam that placed him in remedial math even though he had received a B in Algebra II in high school. After a year, Oscar had yet to earn credit in college-level math and he dropped out. Oscar's story is all too common and illustrates how fumbled handoffs between institutions can slow student progress and derail college aspirations.

Most efforts to advance student success focus inside a single system—improving the effectiveness of public high schools, or community colleges, or universities in isolation from one another. In our experiences across California, College Futures Foundation has found that working in partnership at the regional level with institutions that share students in common “feeder patterns” can be a game changer in addressing barriers to student progress. In addition, visualizing the overall “system” from the perspective of students and strengthening the handoffs from one institution to the next can increase the effectiveness of all institutional efforts. This shift in perspective and shift to working regionally to support student progress across schools and colleges encourages the development of shared goals and ownership for an entire community or region.

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At College Futures Foundation, we have found that working regionally with high schools, community colleges, and universities to visualize the overall “system” from the perspective of students can increase the effectiveness of all institutional efforts.

¹ This example is a composite of many students College Futures has seen through its work in providing scholarships and access to financial aid.

THE BENEFITS OF A COLLEGE DEGREE

Helping more students earn a college degree is crucial for individuals, for communities, and for California as a whole. Increased educational attainment improves economic and social opportunity for individuals. Almost all new-economy jobs require some form of postsecondary education and, in general, the more education that a person has, the greater his or her prospects are for gaining employment in a career that can support a family. In fact, a person with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn nearly \$1 million more over a lifetime than someone with only a high school diploma—and that wage gap is widening. Attaining a bachelor's degree also benefits the public through expanding the tax base, reducing crime, and increasing civic engagement.

Data Sharing and Goal Setting Across Regions and Systems

Over half the freshmen at public four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. enroll within 50 miles of their home. At public community colleges, the median distance from college to the student's home is about eight miles. Among low-income college students, the vast majority enroll close to home to save money on living expenses. In California, more than 60% of K – 12 students are from low-income families. Students from low-income families (the bottom income quartile) earn bachelor's degrees at about a quarter of the rate of those from high-income families (the top quartile). Taken together, these data suggest to us that if California is to increase its college completion rates substantially, a promising approach would be for public school districts, community colleges, and universities to partner with one another regionally and together address barriers faced by low-income students.

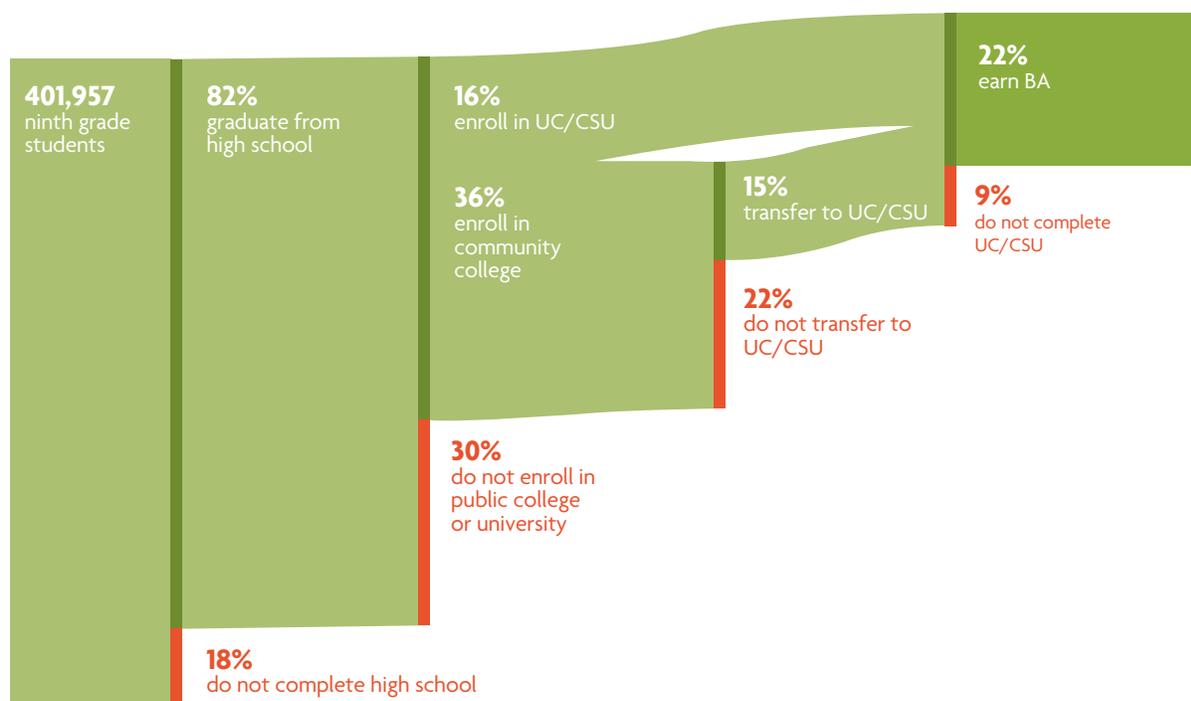
In working with our partners regionally, we have found that sharing and analyzing data about students' progress and outcomes across systems can help to ground and deepen conversations about improving completion. Currently, this type of student information cannot be obtained from state sources because California lacks a statewide data system that follows students' educational journeys from high school into college, from community college to four-year institutions, or from colleges and universities into the job market. But rich troves of data are often available at the regional level. In working with a local community college, for example, high schools can learn how well their students perform in college classes. In turn, these kinds of discussions can lead institutions and communities to identify common goals for student outcomes and to measure progress toward those goals.

To facilitate these conversations and partnerships, we are working to compile both statewide and regional estimates to identify the percentage of high school students who complete a bachelor's degree at a public university and the share of students who progress through key transitions along the way. We focus on public colleges and universities because they serve the bulk of California students, but this perspective could expand to include private institutions. The estimates are "snapshots," not longitudinal analyses, so they are not as precise as the estimates that states with more comprehensive data systems can provide. Nonetheless, the data that are available for California suggest that, statewide,

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about 52% of ninth graders enroll in a California public college or university right after high school and less than a quarter (22%) eventually complete a bachelor's degree at the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) within six years of enrolling or four years of transferring from a community college (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1:
How likely is a California ninth grader to earn a bachelor's degree at UC or CSU?



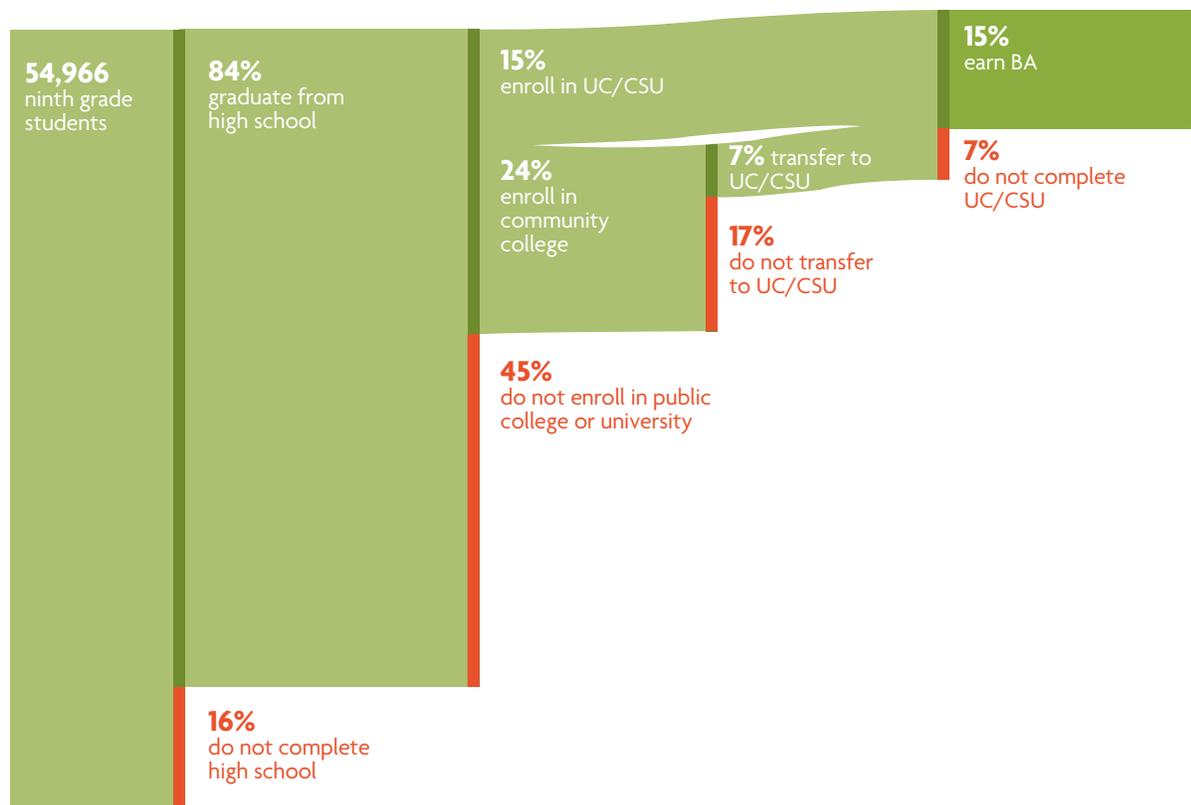
Note: In academic year 2010-11, 401,957 ninth-grade students (includes 529 districts in California with public high schools) started their progress toward becoming the high school class of 2014.

Source: These data are from the most recent publicly available sources at California Department of Education (CDE), California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), UC, and CSU, and are subject to the limitations of the original sources. Bachelor's degree completion is an estimate based on these sources. Community college transfer rates are for six years. We applied six-year CSU and UC completion rates for first-time freshman students and four-year completion rates for transfers. Data are for two- and four-year public institutions and do not include private colleges and universities.

We have found significant variations in this student flow in different regions of our state. For example, in the Inland Empire (which includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties), our estimates suggest that, compared with California as a whole, a slightly higher percentage of students graduate from high school (84% versus 82%), but many fewer enroll in a public college or university (39% versus 53%) or complete a bachelor's degree (15% versus 22%) (see Figure 2). Our partners in the Inland Empire are now using these data to identify challenges in their regional education pipeline and to work together to resolve them.

FIGURE 2:

How likely is a ninth grader in the Inland Empire to earn a bachelor's degree at UC or CSU?



Note: In academic year 2010-11, 54,966 ninth-grade students (includes 48 districts in the Inland Empire with public high schools) started their progress toward becoming the high school class of 2014. The Inland Empire includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Source: See source information for Figure 1.

The Opportunities and Advantages of Partnerships

In working with public school districts, community colleges, and universities at the regional level, we are finding that many educators have few opportunities to work across institutions in sustained ways to address common challenges to student success. Moreover, there are few institutional incentives or resources to support this work. Nonetheless, we are finding that people are energized by these conversations and opportunities. Practitioners care deeply about their students, and improving their students' long-term outcomes is very fulfilling. We are also finding that these partners are in a unique position to find opportunities for improvement. Local leaders and practitioners can be nimble in addressing the changing needs of their own communities, they can unlock local business and civic resources, and they can access institutional databases to help them address their goals.

Regional partners are exploring a variety of questions and data sets, including:

- Outcomes by race, income level, gender, and other sub-populations of students
- Student enrollment, progression, and degree completion in private as well as public colleges and universities
- Completion of associate degrees and certificates
- Participation in and completion of career education programs, job training programs, and internships
- Growth projections for leading industries and fields
- Participation in the workforce

Working across systems is not a zero-sum game; reducing student barriers can bring improvements in institutional as well as student performance.

As well as leading regional partnerships, some institutions are taking advantage of existing resources to help them compile and analyze student information. Cal-PASS Plus and the National Student Clearinghouse are two organizations that provide data and analysis to support these efforts.

In working regionally, we are also witnessing culture changes in education. We believe efforts that emphasize student- and community-centered approaches to education provide a counter-balance to the more typical institutional or segmental approaches. Partners are working across their organizational boundaries to:

- Visualize the entire educational pipeline, from pre-kindergarten to college completion and employment
- Expand their understanding of outcomes for all student populations in their community, not just those served by their institution
- Deepen their engagement with industry, civic groups, and parents
- Develop a shared sense of trust that supports inquiry, exploration, and problem-solving
- Broaden and clarify their goals and outcomes in relation to the communities they serve

For school districts and college campuses, participating in a regional partnership requires a strong vision and commitment from leadership, because cross-system analysis, joint goal-setting, and civic and business engagement can require significant time and effort from staff. Many partners are recognizing, however, that working across systems is not a zero-sum game; reducing student barriers can bring improvements in institutional as well as student performance. As regional partnerships grow, we are hopeful that they can also provide their members with standing to advocate at the state and systems level for policies and resources that can improve educational outcomes for students in their communities.

The Vision and Will to Advance College Completion

In the 2012 Summer Olympics held in London, the U.S. women's relay team in the 4 x 100-meter race made it to the final round—four years after their baton mishap in Beijing. In the medal round, the U.S. sprinters executed their handoffs with precision. The team won gold for the first time in 16 years and broke a world record that had been on the books for 27 years.

California's public education “system”—the full sweep from preschool programs to colleges and universities—may achieve much more with better coordination. And the stakes are much higher, because this system shapes the future of our children and our state.

Increasing numbers of school districts, community colleges, and universities are beginning to partner regionally and to establish joint goals for improving student success across systems, although there is much work remaining to engage more institutions in this work and to support these kinds of partnerships over time. We have found that the sharing and analysis of student data can be an important basis and springboard for enriching these conversations, but there are many ways forward in shifting the perspective to a regional and systems approach. In most cases, the biggest challenges involve developing the vision to partner and set cross-system goals, the *will* to share and analyze information about student performance across institutions, and the *persistence* to act on the findings, so that students are served well at every transition from preschool to college graduation. As one local leader said, “We need to get better at the handoffs.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

The diagrams of student progress in this brief reflect some of our tools to support educational partners as they work regionally to address and improve student performance across schools, community colleges, and universities. In summer 2017, we will be releasing an interactive data tool that allows the public to explore online visualizations of student progress, from ninth grade to bachelor's degree, similar to the diagrams shared in this brief.

RESOURCES

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About College Futures Foundation

College Futures Foundation works with partners throughout California to increase bachelor's degree attainment among low-income students and others who are underrepresented in higher education. The Foundation operates on the belief that every qualified student in California should have the opportunity to succeed in college and it recognizes that creating a vibrant future for our state requires awarding more bachelor's degrees to broader populations of students. Established in 2005 as a private foundation, College Futures supports work in three areas: improving student transitions toward degree completion; developing and strengthening partnerships across institutions, systems, and regions to drive increases in bachelor's degree attainment; and reducing gaps between policy and practice to advance student access to and success in college.

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