

Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2017

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November 2017

PREFERRED CITATION

Juszkiewicz, J. (2017, November). *Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2017*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

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This is the fourth in a series of American Association of Community Colleges analyses of trends in community college enrollments. The report also examines completion rates, featuring graduation rates published by the U.S. Department of Education (based on institutional-level reporting), and the National Student Clearinghouse's completion rates (based on student-level data). As of October 2017, the Education Department has begun releasing outcomes measures (OM) that capture program completion for a much larger swath of students than previously were measured.

Overview and Highlights

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) release annual reports on higher education fall enrollment and student outcomes. They use the same postsecondary institutional classifications¹ for community colleges, which facilitates comparative analysis.

As is widely known, the Great Recession of 2007-2009 led to a dramatic spike of community college enrollment. But that surge has been followed by years of steady declines. In this same post-recession period, public 4-year institutions have seen steady, albeit slight, enrollment increases.

Major findings include:

- There was a continued nationwide decline in community college enrollment since the 2010 peak. The decrease in enrollment of older students has been the highest and the most consistent over the past 3 years.
- According to the NSC, more than 39% of all community college students earn a credential, while ED's official graduation rate is 25%.
- The NSC completion rate for full-time-only students, which is the most comparable to ED's official graduation rate, is 55%, or a little more than two times higher than ED's. The NSC tracks students for twice as long as ED—6 years rather than 3 years. (The 3-year measurement

represents 150% of the "normal" time to completion, as prescribed in statute.)

- The new ED 8-year outcome measure for full-time, first-time students is 33% completing at the same institution. Interestingly, the highest percent of completers at the same institution were full-time, non-first-time students, almost 36%, slightly higher than their first-time counterparts.

Trends in Community College Enrollment

In the fall of 2015, and for the third straight year, overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions continued its decline. The drop was due primarily to enrollment decreases in for-profit and public 2-year institutions. Public 2-year college enrollments declined less than 3% for the second consecutive year, while private, for-profit 4-year institutions experienced a much sharper decline.²

The more current NSC fall 2016 enrollment numbers indicate little abatement in declining community college enrollments. This was accompanied by steady enrollment in 4-year public institutions, and a continued sharp enrollment drop in private, for-profit institutions—14.5% since the previous fall.³ The direction of change in enrollment across sectors for ED and NSC data are comparable; however, they differ somewhat in terms of the intensity of the ups and downs. (Table 1)

¹The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) classifies postsecondary institutions into nine categories based on control and level. <https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisGlossaryAll.aspx>. Control categories are public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit. There are three level categories, which are based on the highest degree awarded, 4-year and higher (4 year), 2-but-less-than 4-year (2 year), and less than 2-year.

Table 1: Percent Change in Fall Enrollment by Select Institutions, 2013-2016

	Total Fall Enrollment		Public 4-year Institutions		Public 2-year Institutions	
	Percent Change From Previous Year					
	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC
Fall 2013	-1.4%	-1.5%	0.3%	0.3%	-2.4%	-3.1%
Fall 2014	-0.9%	-1.3%	1.7%	2.9%	-3.3%	-6.9%
Fall 2015	-1.3%	-1.7%	1.2%	0.4%	-2.8%	-2.4%
Fall 2016		-1.4%		0.2%		-2.6%

Table 2: Percent Changes in NSC Fall Enrollment at Public 2-Year Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity, 2014-2016

	Percent Change from Prior Year Public 2-Year Institutions					
	Gender		Age		Enrollment Intensity	
	Men	Women	24 and Under	Over 24	Part-Time	Full-Time
Fall 2014	-4.6%	-4.2%	-2.4%	-7.6%	-3.6%	-5.6%
Fall 2015	-1.7%	-3.8%	-1.0%	-6.2%	-1.2%	-5.6%
Fall 2016	-3.1%	-2.2%	-1.0%	-5.5%	-2.0%	-3.5%

During the 36-month period between fall 2013 and fall 2016, the drop in enrollment at community colleges has not fluctuated more than two percentage points. This decline has exceeded the overall postsecondary enrollment drop.

The NSC tracks the age and gender of students and enrollment intensity level. As Table 2 shows, the enrollment of students over the age of 24 has continued to decline at a higher rate than for other students, although the decline is the lowest in 3 years.

In the United States, there are 30 million “good jobs,” defined by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce in a recent report as paying a minimum of \$35,000 and an average of \$55,000 per year and not requiring a bachelor’s degree. It turns out that 11.6 million, and the largest share, are held by high school graduates. However, their share is diminishing relative to jobs requiring

some postsecondary experience or credential, which will very likely affect future college enrollment.⁴

At the same time that the economy is calling for an increasingly skilled workforce, the quality and value of higher education institutions are being increasingly questioned by the public despite broad recognition of the economic returns on higher education. According to the aforementioned Georgetown University report on “good jobs,” there are 30 million non-baccalaureate good jobs and 36 million that require a baccalaureate. Enrollment at 4-year institutions has been steady for the past few years, attributable in part to their educating a higher percent of traditional age students pursuing a postsecondary education rather than entering immediately into the workforce. It also remains the case that an overwhelming percentage of community college students state an intention to earn a bachelor’s degree at some point, though most do not follow through.

Economic forces, such as a rebounding economy with more jobs and shrinking unemployment, are not the only factors affecting college enrollment, whereby people who otherwise might consider attending a community college are opting instead to go directly into the workforce. The higher education landscape is complex and competitive. Affordability continues to play a role in whether and where students enroll. Free tuition at 2-year institutions in some states, such as the Tennessee Promise program, may attract some students whose first choice was a 4-year institution. It is early yet to assess the impact on enrollment of New York's recently instituted Excelsior Scholarship program, which covers all public institutions. State investment in higher education affects college affordability. Lower state appropriations typically translate into higher tuitions. There may be other factors affecting enrollment, such as the size of the high school graduate pipeline, which in turn is affected by the sheer number of students and graduation rate.

More on Graduation Rates and Other Completion Measures

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has long advocated for completion measures that accurately capture the performance of community college students, many of whom attend part time and have attended college previously. The current ED official graduation rate is 150% of the "normal" time to completion for only one group of students: first-time, full-time. This 3-year window for 2-year programs that excludes transfers is clearly inadequate. A top AACC priority in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) is adding to the official graduation rate a 300% of normal time to completion graduation rate for community colleges, including transfers out. This change would more accurately measure community college student success and aligns with measures in the AACC-led Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA), which was developed by community colleges.⁵ AACC supports legislation (S. 351, Comprehensive Student Achievement Information Act of 2017) that would, in fact, recognize the 300% graduation rate as well as the current 150%.⁶

In October 2017, ED released data from a new Outcome Measures (OM) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data (IPEDS) survey.⁷ The new OM survey includes all community college credit students and tracks them for 8 years. In addition to counting the number of completers who are first-time, full-time students, outcome measures also include three other groups of students: first-time, part-time; not-first-time, full-time; and not-first-time, part-time students. Completion is only one outcome measure. The other measures are: still enrolled in the same institution, enrolled at another institution, or enrollment status unknown. Data are reported for transfers out, but as a separate outcome and not as part of completion as defined in the VFA and for which AACC has advocated.

Graduation and Completion Rates

For the most recent cohort of first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seekers attending public 2-year institutions (cohort year 2013), the official graduation rate was 25.4%,⁸ which was almost a 2% increase from the previous year and the second consecutive year in which the graduation rate is higher than the lowest graduation rate of 21.1% for the recession cohort.⁹ Obviously this is very encouraging news. The rate is slightly higher for women (26.1%) than men (24.6%).

The NSC measures completion differently than the U.S. Department of Education. The NSC tracks students for a 6-year period and across institutions. According to the NSC's completion report¹⁰ (Figure 2), the overall 6-year completion rate for students who started in the fall of 2010 at public 2-year institutions and completed was 27%. An additional 3.3% completed at a different 2-year institution and 9% completed at a 4-year institution. All told, within 6 years, 39.3% of the community college students completed a program either at the starting institution or a different institution. It is important to note that this is for all students, including part-time students. An additional 16% of students at public 2-year institutions were still enrolled in a community college or 4-year institution after 6 years. NSC data show that students at public 2-year institutions whose enrollment was

²The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) classifies postsecondary institutions into nine categories based on control and level. <https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisGlossaryAll.aspx>. Control categories are public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit. There are three level categories, which are based on the highest degree awarded, 4-year and higher (4 year), 2-but-less-than 4-year (2 year), and less than 2-year.

Figure 1: Graduation Rate at Public 2-Year Institutions, Cohort Years 2007-2013

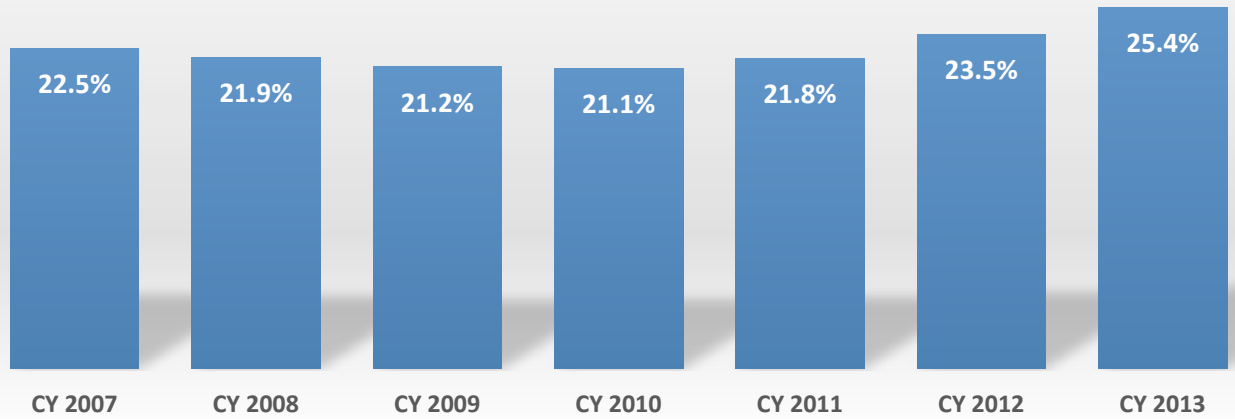
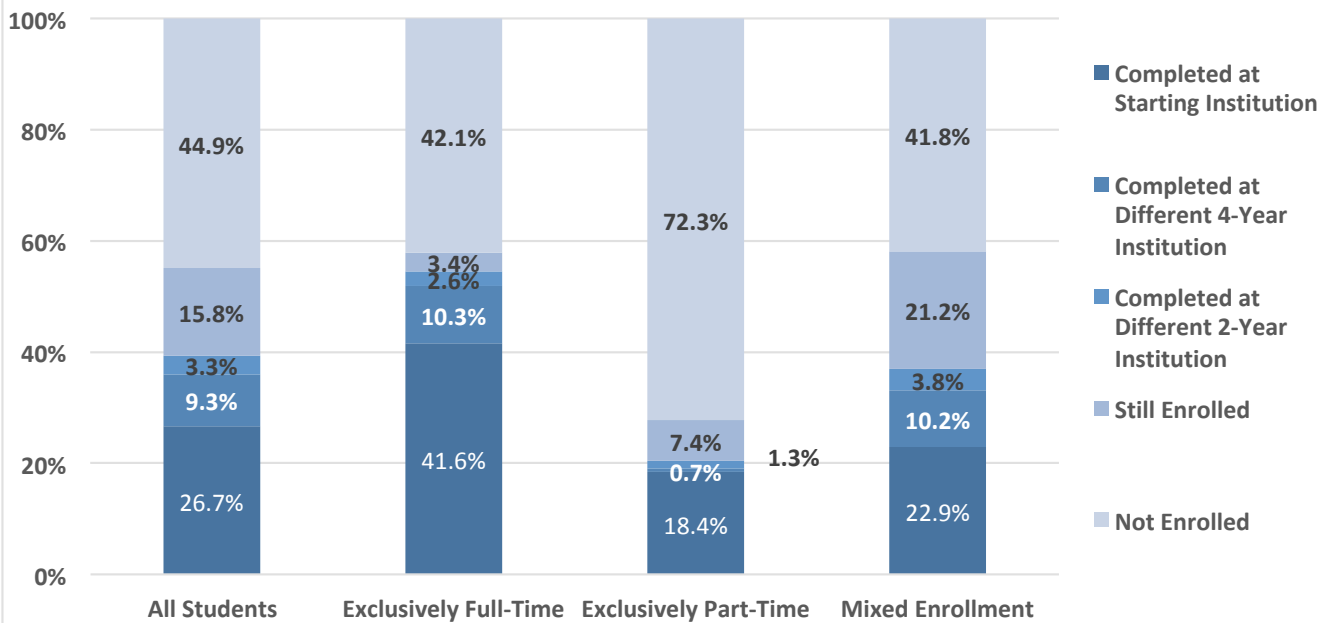


Figure 2: Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started Fall 2010 at Public 2-Year Institutions by Enrollment Intensity



exclusively full time had a completion rate at their starting institution of 42.1%. This is more than one-and-a-half times the official 150% of “normal” time IPEDS graduation rate for full-time students. By including students who transfer to other institutions, the NSC completion rate for full-time students increases to 55%, or more than twice the official ED graduation rate. These findings belie the commonly

held belief that most community college students don’t graduate, because, in fact, most full-time students do complete a program and graduate.

In contrast, the NSC completion rate for exclusively part-time students at public 2-year institutions was 20.4%, with 18.4% completing at their starting institution, which is 5 percentage points less than the

Figure 3: Completion Rates of First-Time, Full-Time Students Who Start at Public 2-Year Institutions

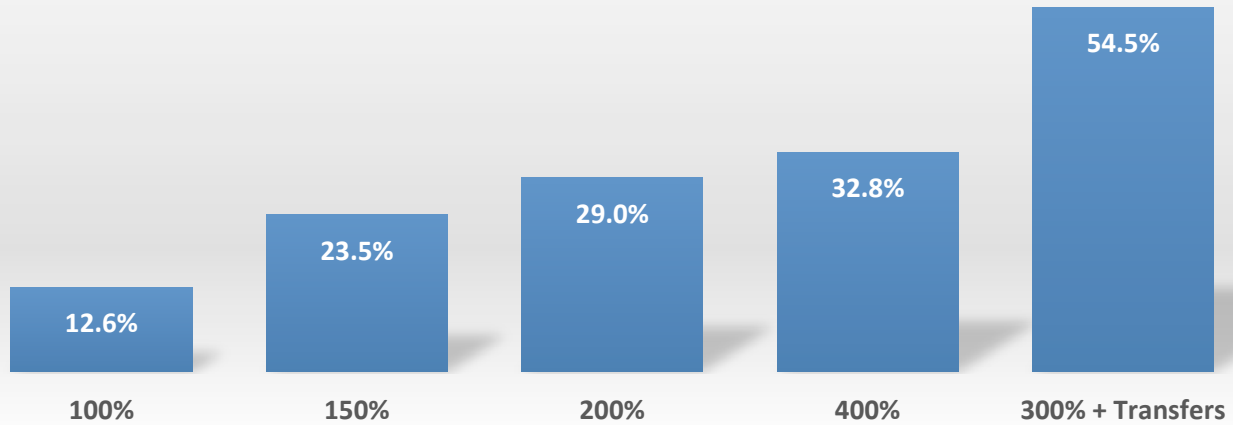
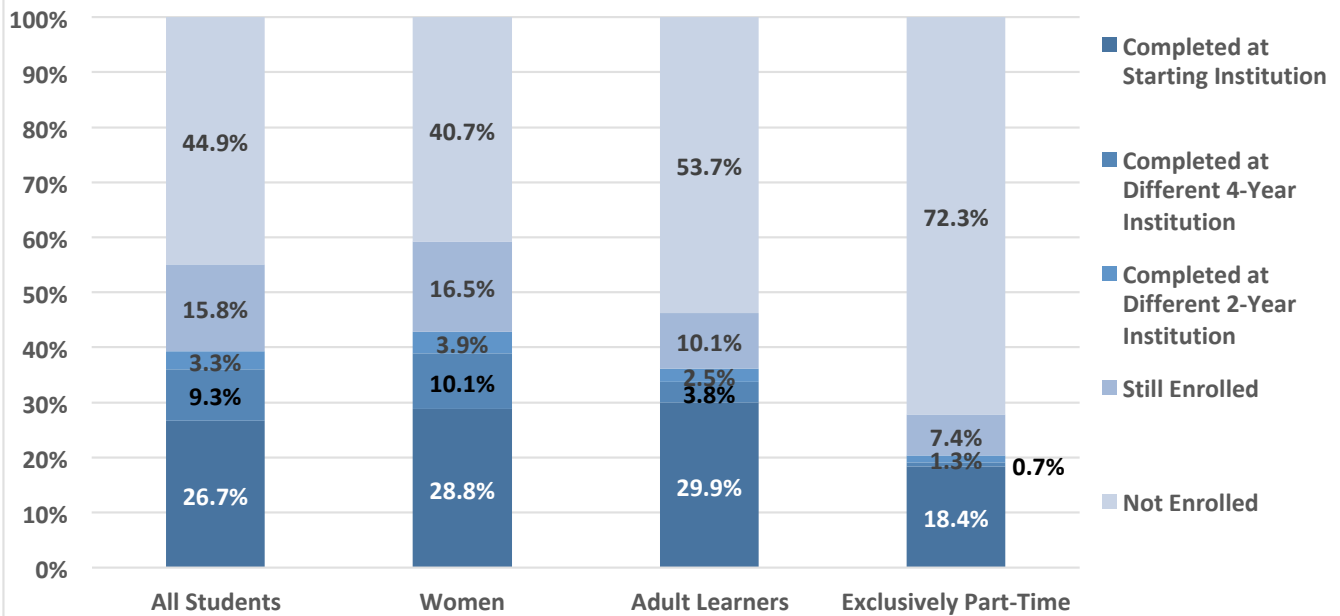


Figure 4: Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started Fall 2010 at Public 2-Year Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity



cohort of full-time students after 3 years as measured by ED. Nearly one out of three (31.8%) community college completers received their credential from a different institution than the one they entered. For those attending exclusively full time, however, that percentage dropped to 24%.

As Figure 3 shows, the length of time that community college students are tracked, as well as taking

into account transfer to other institutions, makes a considerable difference in completion rates. Using the 6-year window for which AACC advocates results in completion rates that are more than four times higher than the “on-time” rate, or 2-year window for associate-degree seeking students that only looks at the starting institution. Three of the completion rates—100%, 150%, 200%—depicted in Figure 3 are ED’s based on cohort year 2012; the 400% rate is from

the OM survey; and the 300% plus transfer rate is the NSC completion rate for the fall 2010 cohort.

The 6-year completion rate differed by student gender and age as follows (Figure 4): (1) women had a higher completion rate than men—41.5% and 35.7%, respectively; and (2) adult learners (those over age 24) had a lower completion rate than those 20 or younger, but higher than students between ages 20 and 24, 36.6% compared to 40.7% and 25.1%, respectively.

According to the NSC, adult community college learners who attended exclusively part time had a 25.6% completion rate, compared to 49.5% who attended exclusively full time. The youngest students who attended exclusively full time had the highest completion rate of 59.7%, a full 10 percentage points higher than their over 24-year-old counterparts. Community college students in the in-between age group, 20 and 24, who attended exclusively full time had a completion rate of only 34.8%.

Outcome Measures

So how do ED's new outcome measures compare to the official graduation rate and NSC's completion rate? By expanding the time frame for tracking students from 3 or 4 years to 8 years, it is evident that a higher percentage of full-time community college students complete their programs. It is also encouraging that full-time, non-first-time students, also referred to as transfer-in students at public 2-year institutions, complete at higher rates than full-time, first-time students. In fact, this finding cuts across all of higher education. Nearly half (49%) of those earning

a bachelor's degree in academic year 2015-16 had previously attended a public 2-year institution.¹¹

A careful review of these data reveals that a higher percentage of exclusively full-time students complete at their institution within 6 years based on NSC data than is demonstrated after 8 years in the ED Outcome Measures data. A possible explanation may be in the definition of full-time attendance. NSC full-time students are enrolled full time every term in the data, whereas full-time students in the OM data enrolled full time their first term, but may enroll less than full time in subsequent terms. It also is important to note that the findings are based on different cohort years, 2008 and 2010, respectively.

Not surprisingly, the percent of part-time students who complete within 8 years is lower than for their full-time counterparts. However, they are comparable to the percent of part-time and mixed enrollment completers within 6 years, as tracked by the NSC. The OM show that a high percent of all students, especially those who started as part-time community college students, subsequently enrolled at another institution within 8 years.

Although ED's outcomes measures represent an improvement over the graduation rate, they are less comprehensive than AACC's Voluntary Framework of Accountability, which is also an institutional-level data collection. The OM, for example, do not separate out the type of credential that students earn (i.e., certificate or degree) or treat transfers in the same way. The OM do not include students who complete a community college credential and subsequently transfer to another

Table 1: Outcome Measures at Public 2-Year Institutions by Enrollment Status (first term), Cohort Year 2008

	Completed	Still Enrolled Starting Institution	Enrolled at Another Institution	Enrollment Status Unknown
Full-time, first-time	32.8%	2.1%	29.1%	35.9%
Part-time, first-time	17.0%	2.6%	31.7%	48.7%
Full-time, non-first-time	35.6%	1.3%	33.9%	29.2%
Part-time, non-first-time	20.3%	1.6%	42.4%	35.8%

institution, or document how many students left without a credential but had completed one academic year (30 or semester credits) at the institution.

As stated, the OM, unlike the NSC data, are aggregate and not student-level. This precludes the OM from tracking students across institutions, a major shortcoming. AACC strongly advocates the lifting of the ban on a national student unit record data system (SURDS), in part because it would allow such tracking. AACC supports the College Transparency Act introduced in both chambers (S. 1121 and H.R. 2434) in the 115th Congress.¹² An added, substantial benefit of SURDS would be to reduce institutional administrative burden of data collection.

The Impact of Changes in Enrollment on Completion Rates

Community college enrollment has declined sharply since its peak in fall 2010, but completion rates have either held steady or increased slightly, depending on the cohort year, student demographics, and other variables. The tremendous work invested in increasing completion rates makes the positive change in completion rates a particularly welcome development. As the economy continues to recover, declining community college enrollments, particularly in institutions that educate a high proportion of non-

traditional age students, are to be expected. However, several developments suggest that this trend is likely to plateau and potentially reverse in the medium term for a variety of reasons: 1) there has been a consistent uptick in dual enrollment; 2) more state and local free college tuition programs are being established; 3) employers will increasingly need workers with postsecondary skills and credentials; and 4) community colleges will continue to have an edge over other sectors in affordability and ability to start or expand programs in high demand. In addition, the projected massive retirement of baby boomers that was inhibited by the economic downturn will ultimately proceed, opening up millions of jobs.

Some speculate that the decline in enrollments during the current economic recovery has meant that there are fewer underprepared students enrolling, which in turn has translated into higher completion rates. In the past few years, colleges that saw the biggest boost in graduation rates, or at least a return to pre-recession rates, are those that educate a higher proportion of non-traditional students.

To meet the demand of more educated and skilled workers, it is necessary to bring more students—of all ages and backgrounds—into community college, and to get them to graduation. Achieving this will remain a central focus of community colleges everywhere.

Notes

¹Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2017). Postsecondary Institutions and Cost of Attendance in 2016–17; Degrees and Other Awards Conferred, 2015–16; and 12-Month Enrollment, 2015–16: First Look (Preliminary Data) (NCES 2017-075). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017075.pdf>

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⁶American Association of Community Colleges and Association of Community College Trustees. (2017, May 15). Joint letter of support to the Honorable Orrin Hatch for introducing the Comprehensive Student Achievement Information Act of 2017, S. 351. Retrieved from: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/351> and http://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/AACC-ACCT_LetterofSupport_S351.pdf

⁷Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2017). Graduation Rates for Selected Cohorts, 2008–13; Outcome Measures for Cohort Year 2008; Student Financial Aid, Academic Year 2015–16; and Admissions in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2016: First Look (Preliminary Data) (NCES 2017-150). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017150.pdf>

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2014). Graduation Rates for Selected Cohorts, 2005–10; and Student Financial Aid in Postsecondary Institutions, Academic Year 2012–13. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014105.pdf>

¹⁰Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Hwang, Y. (2016, November). Completing college: A national view of student attainment rates – fall 2010 cohort (Signature Report No. 12). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12/>

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¹²American Association of Community Colleges and Association of Community College Trustees. (2017, May 15). Joint letter of support to the Honorable Orrin Hatch for introducing the College Transparency Act, S. 1121 and H.R. 2434. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1121>, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2434> and <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CollegeTransparencyActSupport.pdf>