

# Persistence

JACK KENT COOKE  
FOUNDATION

The Success of Students Who Transfer from  
Community Colleges to Selective Four-Year Institutions

## Executive Summary

Earning a bachelor's degree is an increasingly essential step towards economic mobility and job security. Completing that step is harder for students who begin at a community college. While the majority of community college students indicate a desire to transfer, only one third actually do.<sup>1</sup> Failure to transfer is often not a function of students' academic readiness. Recent research estimates that more than 50,000 high-achieving community college students from lower-income families are academically ready to transfer but do not—including 15,000 with a GPA of 3.7 or higher.<sup>2</sup>

Increasing transfer success of community college students has the potential to improve preparedness of America's workforce. Yet little is known about the types of institutions to which students transfer from community colleges. This report, "Persistence: The Success of Students Who Transfer From Community Colleges to Selective Colleges and Universities," examines the extent to which students from public, two-year colleges transfer to selective four-year institutions, and how they fare once enrolled. Data on students enrolled between 2010 and 2016 were used to examine transfer patterns and outcomes for both institutions and students. The report examines data across the higher education spectrum, with a focus on selective colleges and universities — i.e., those classified as "Most Competitive" or "Highly Competitive" in the Barron's 2016 Competitiveness Index. For the academically talented student, there are numerous documented benefits to attending a more selective institution, including higher graduation rates, increased earnings post-degree, and higher rates of graduate school enrollment.<sup>3</sup>

The report outlines the transfer patterns of students entering four-year colleges and universities, describes the characteristics of community colleges most likely to send their students to selective institutions, documents the outcomes of transfer students relative to other students, and closes with recommended practices for promoting transfer access at selective four-year institutions. Key findings of the report include the following:

- **Selective colleges and universities do not enroll many community college transfer students.** Over three-quarters of students at selective institutions come directly from high school. Those transfer students that are admitted tend to come from other four-year institutions, rather than community colleges (Exhibit 1). Community college students represent

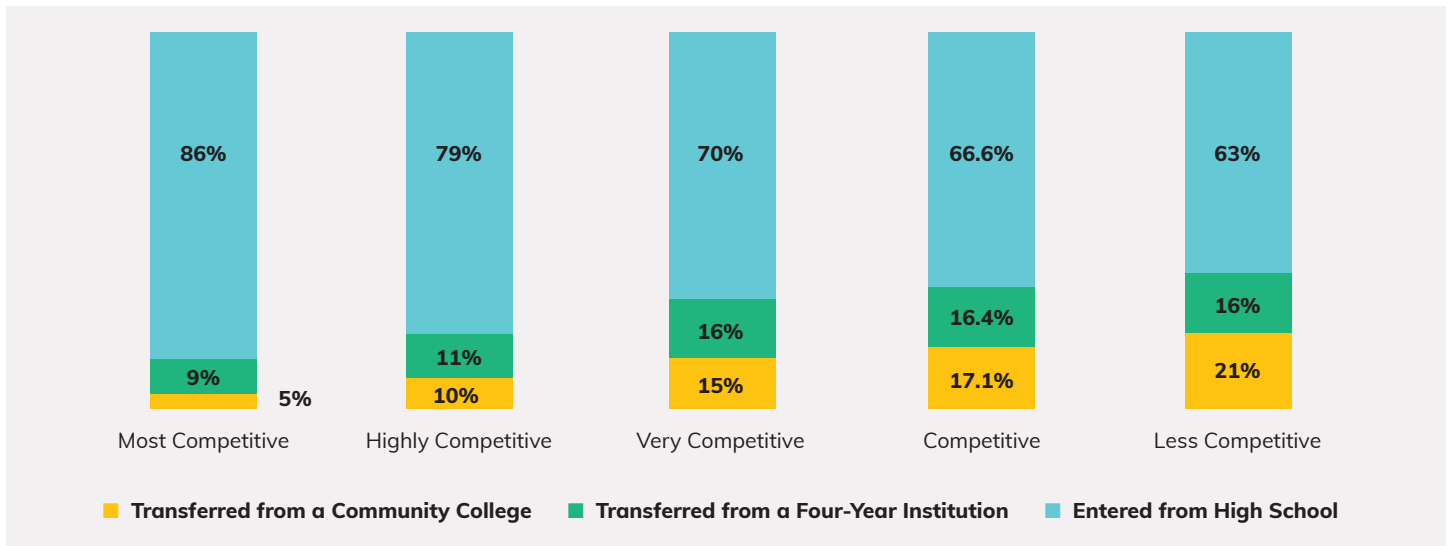
11 percent of entering undergraduates at public institutions, and only 3 percent at private institutions. As a result, 35 public selective institutions enroll four times as many transfer students as the 140 private selective institutions.

- **Students who do transfer from community colleges to selective colleges and universities are successful.** Over 35,000 community college students transfer annually to selective colleges and universities, where they are equally if not more likely to graduate than students who enrolled directly from high school or transferred from other four-year institutions (Exhibit 2). They do so in a reasonable amount of time, earning their degree within two and a half years, on average.
- **Students transferring to selective colleges and universities come from community colleges across the nation.** Fully 84 percent of the nation's two-year institutions transferred at least one student to a selective four-year institution in fall 2016. Community colleges with larger enrollments, situated in more urban areas, and offering honors programs are more likely to transfer students to selective institutions.

Research has shown that students' likelihood of completing their bachelor's degree sharply correlates with socioeconomic background. Students from the top family income quartile are five times more likely than individuals from the bottom income quartile to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 24 (58 versus 12 percent, respectively).<sup>4</sup> The failure of many students with financial need to earn a bachelor's degree is a loss not only for their individual career success and mobility, but also a collective loss of talent for the nation.

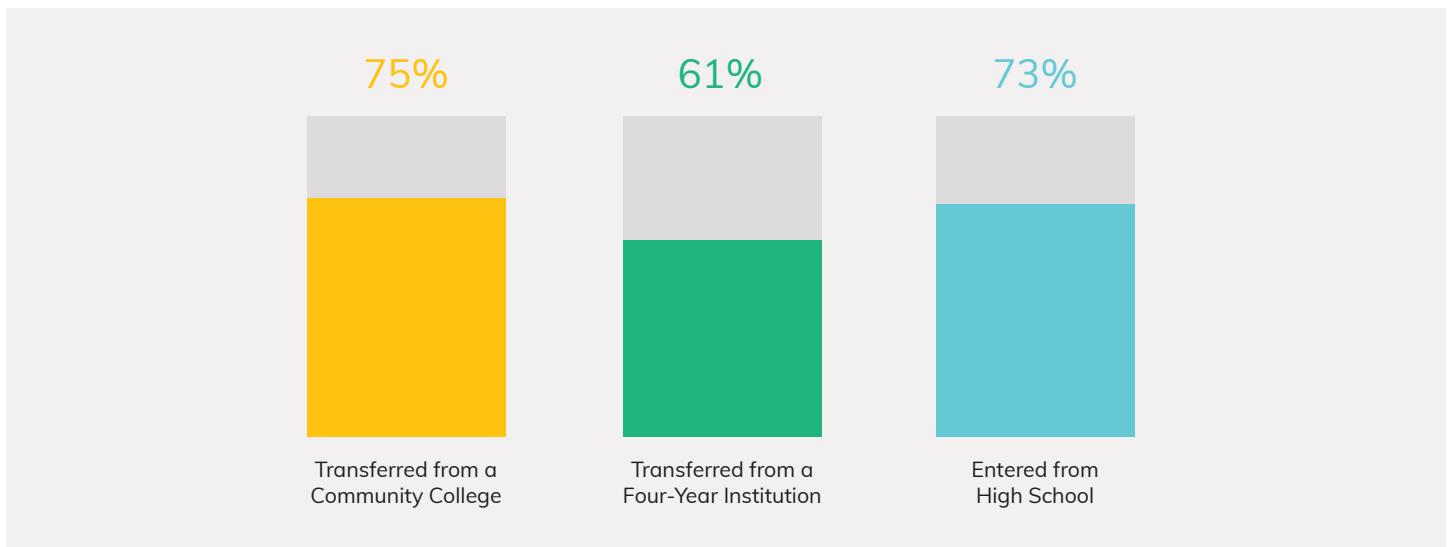
The research presented in this report demonstrates that community college students who transfer to selective colleges and universities successfully complete their degrees, often with higher graduation rates than other students. Because lower-income students are three times more likely to begin their postsecondary pursuits at a community college than higher-income students, strengthening transfer pathways to selective institutions has the potential to increase bachelor's completion rates for our nation's brightest students. It also can assist selective higher education institutions increase the diversification of their student bodies along lines of socioeconomic status, first-generation status, or age.

## Exhibit 1: Fall 2016 Distribution of New Undergraduates, by Institutional Selectivity (Percent of Students in the 2016 Entering Class)



Note: Reporting the enrollment distribution of 2,517,030 students enrolled at a four-year institution in fall 2016 who were not previously enrolled at that four-year institution, and who did not already have a bachelor's degree. Results from data tables produced for the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation by the National Student Clearinghouse. Includes both full-time and part-time students, and degree-seeking and non-degree-seeking students.

## Exhibit 2: Six-Year Graduation Rates of Undergraduate Students at Selective Colleges and Universities



Note: Reporting on the graduation outcomes of 363,130 students who enrolled at a selective institution (i.e., Most or Highly Competitive) in fall 2010. Results come from analysis of data tables produced for the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation by the National Student Clearinghouse. Students included in these analyses include full-time and part-time students, as well as both degree-seeking and non-degree-seeking students. These graduation rates are lower than the "Student Right-to-Know" graduation rates reported by institutions to the Department of Education, which are limited to first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students.

<sup>1</sup> Jenkins, D. and Fink, J. (2016) *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees*. Community College Research Center, the Aspen Institute, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center; U.S. Department of Education (2011) *Community College Student Outcomes: 1994-2009*. NCES 2012-253.

<sup>2</sup> Lavolet, T., Fresquez, B., Maxson, M. and Wyner, J. (2018) *The Talent Blind Spot: The Case for Increasing Community College Transfer to High Graduation Rate Institutions*. Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Giancola, J. and Kahlenberg, R.D. (2016) *True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> The Pell Institute. (2017). *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States*.