

Guided Pathways: How Completions May Begin to Change

Too few students are currently completing college. Many are not finishing at all or not completing in a timely manner. Guided Pathways is a major initiative aimed squarely at increasing college completion. It will take time and a lot of hard work to implement. When successfully done, it offers promise to increase attainment, reduce time to degree, and improve degree efficiency. We can look for early signs of this in how students gain momentum and increase their academic progress.

College Completions Essential to Meeting State Goals

Washington State established an ambitious goal for 70 percent of all Washingtonians to have a post-secondary credential by 2023. Reaching the goal requires producing an additional 380,000 new credential holders. Based upon the demographics of the population, the community and technical colleges will be responsible for 60 percent of these additional new awards.¹ This goal is in line with national goals such as the Lumina Foundation's call for 60 percent of adults to have a college credential by 2025. These goals are driven by needs of the economy for a skilled workforce and the increasing importance of a credential for future employment and earnings. Low completion rates and length of time to complete a degree are critical areas to address in order to achieve these goals.

Guided Pathways is a major initiative aimed at increasing college completion. The approach simplifies student decision-making and allows colleges to provide predictable schedules and frequent feedback so students can complete degrees efficiently. Under this framework, colleges re-design their degrees and offerings into structured pathways that align with students' goals for further education and careers. Colleges support incoming students in choosing a program of study and developing an academic plan based on a recommended program map created by faculty and advisors. These actions should be implemented at scale to increase completions, reduce time to degree, and close equity gaps.

It will be a challenge to implement the changes required of colleges through Guided Pathways and it will take time before colleges and students can see significant changes in completion rates or subsequent results for employment and further education. That said, changes in how students progress toward completion should become apparent within the next several years.

Early Academic Momentum as an Indication of Completion

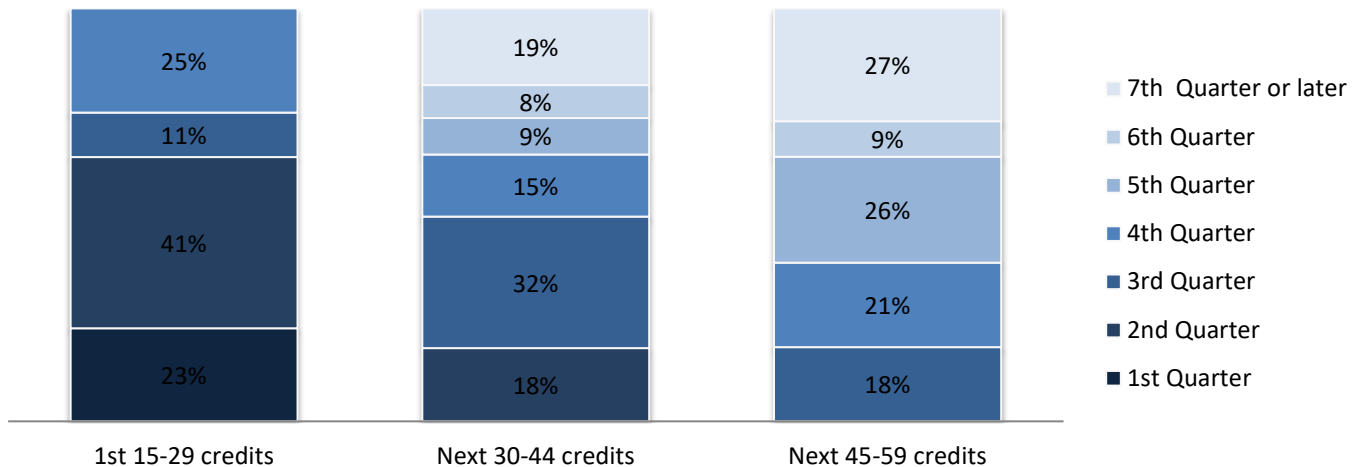
In Washington State, we measure academic momentum when students reach 15, 30 and 45 credits for courses that are countable to their degree or program requirements. Students' academic momentum is also measured for completing basic requirements in college English and math. This provides comparison data to measure how much pathways has increased academic momentum by guiding students to more quickly and efficiently accumulate college credits and pass critical course completion milestones.

To begin to visualize how Guided Pathways can influence credit accumulation, one need go no further than to look at how students are presently doing. As an example, Figure 1 looks backwards at "successful" students who earned transfer DTA degrees in 2014. This graduating class was comprised of students who started college between 2010 and 2013. The data in Figure 1 shows when students reached the college credit thresholds. About one in four (23 percent) earned their first 15 college credits in their first quarter. Just 18 percent earned their first 30 college credits within two quarters and a like percentage earned their first 45 credits within 3 quarters. On the other end, one in four did not reach 15 college credits until the fourth quarter after they started. Nearly one in five (19

percent) did not complete 30 college credits until the 7th quarter or longer- nearly 2 full academic years and more than one in four (27 percent) took about 2 years before they completed their first year of college credits-countable towards their degree requirements.

There are a number of reasons that can explain these patterns. One reason is full and part-time enrollment. Interestingly, the vast majority of all degree-seeking students enroll full-time in their first quarter. In fall 2014, three in every four (76 percent) first-time, first-year degree-seeking students reported to IPEDS were enrolled full-time to start. How many credits students take is another important factor. Students are required to take 12 credits for full-time financial aid. However, as the DTA is 90 credits, without summer quarters, a student would need to earn 15 credits per quarter in order to complete the degree in two years, excluding the need for any remediation. About one quarter (27 percent) of the "successful" students who started full time enrolled for between 12 and 14 credits. National research has shown that full-time students who enroll in 15 credits, in particular in their first and/or second quarters can make a significant difference in improving completion rates.ⁱⁱ

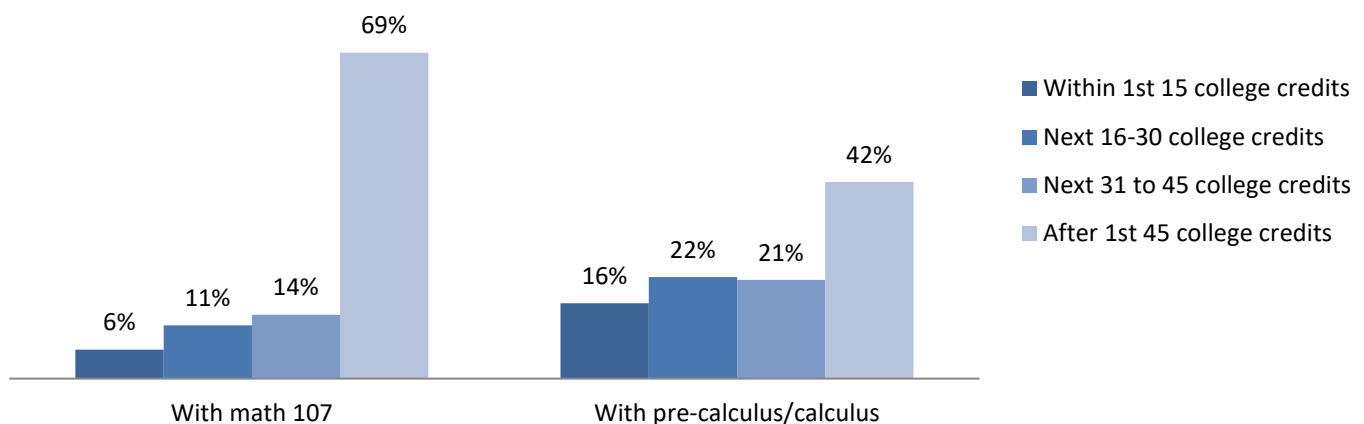
Fig. 1: Quarter after start when "successful" DTA graduates reached college credit milestones



College math and English as Important Momentum Points

Meeting basic requirements in college math and English are two more important academic momentum points. The basic math requirement for a DTA degree is 5 credits in a college math or logic course. Over half (52 percent) of the “successful” students met their math requirement within their first 45 college credits earned. That said, the math pathway followed had some bearing on when students met the requirement. As shown in Figure 2, students who pursued a pre-calculus/calculus pathway were far more likely to complete their basic math requirements for the degree within their first 45 college credits than students who met the requirement taking Math in Society (MATH 107). One explanation for this may be that pre-calculus/calculus is a pre-requisite for other science courses the student also attempted. It also may be that these students were more math-ready or had a well-formed goal at the start of college. Colleges and the system are making strong efforts to design math pathways for all degrees and programs that align with students’ goals and support their related learning outcomes.

Fig. 2: When "successful" DTA students met their college math transfer requirement



Credit Accrual Impact on Total Cost of Degree

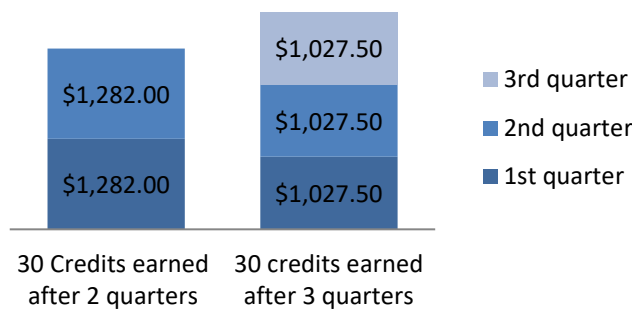
The point in time when students reach the milestones discussed in this brief can have an effect on overall college cost and efficiency in degree completion. Washington’s community and technical college tuition and fee structure is designed to reward and influence students to be more timely. In fall 2015, the per credit charge for tuition and fees is \$102.75 for credits 1-10. The incremental per credit increase for each credit between 11 and 18 is \$50.90. Figure 3 shows the difference in cost for a student who reaches the 30

credit milestone in 3 ten-credit quarters versus to enrolling 15 credits per quarter for 2 quarters. A student who enrolls ten credits per quarter for 3 quarters will pay a total of \$3,082.50 in tuition and fees. A student who enrolls 15 credits per quarter for 2 quarters will pay \$2,564. Just to this milestone, the difference in tuition and fees paid by the student is \$520 or 20 percent less if a student can enroll for 15 credits.

Increasing the number of students who complete versus leaving college without a credential by definition will also lower the cost per completion for the state. Forthcoming research by CCRC suggests that higher starting credit loads for full-time students can also reduce the state’s costs.

Guided Pathways will take time to implement. It will take strong consensus and a lot of hard work. This brief shares a common vision for some intermediate ways to measure the job at hand. The vision suggests keeping an eye on metrics for academic momentum and how Guided Pathways can influence and change- college completion, time to degree, and degree efficiency.

Fig. 3: Tuition and fees for 30 college credits if earned in 2 or 3 college quarters



ⁱ <http://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/reports/socioeconomic-research.aspx>

ⁱⁱ There have been several national studies funded by Lumina Foundation and supported by Complete College America to document the importance of defining full-time enrollment as 15 credits to the overall accumulation of credits and degree

completion. This brief looked at these notions based upon forthcoming work conducted by the Community College Research Center to describe the effects of academic momentum on completion and the economic importance of these effects to students in Tennessee.