

# Completion and Transfer Success of High-Achieving Community College Students

Monica Marlowe

Doctoral Candidate, College of Education  
Mississippi State University

Lynn Tincher-Ladner

President and CEO  
Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society

Stephanie King

Graduate Faculty, College of Education  
Mississippi State University

George Boggs

Chair, Phi Theta Kappa Board of Directors  
President and CEO Emeritus, American Association of Community Colleges  
Superintendent/President Emeritus, Palomar College

## Summary

In recent national studies, findings have not been favorable for completion, and even more recently, for transfer outcomes of community college students (AACC, 2015; Jenkins & Fink, 2016, Shapiro et al., 2014, 2015). These studies also show a large variability in success metrics when community colleges are compared by state and by individual institution. This new report, however, shows very favorable completion and transfer success outcomes for a defined group of high-achieving community college students, and outcomes show much less variability across states and institutions. Tracking high-achieving community college students put previous reports into a new perspective.

## Key Terms

The following definitions will assist the reader in understanding the findings of this research brief.

Term	Definition
Completion	A student who obtains any credential from an institution of higher learning. Credentials include certificate, associate, bachelor's degree or higher.
Completion Rate	The ratio of unduplicated counts of students reaching completion divided by the total number of students in a particular tracking cohort.
Student Success Rate	The sum of the completion and transfer-out rates.
Transfer	The matriculation of a student from a college in the two-year sector to a college in a four-year sector, regardless of time spent or hours accumulated in the two-year college.
Transfer rate	The proportion of students who transfer to a four-year college or university with or without completion of a degree at the two-year institution.
Transfer-out rate	The proportion of students who transfer to a four-year college or university without completion of a degree or credential at the two-year institution.

## Major Findings

In this study “high-achieving community college student” is defined as a community college student who has accepted membership into Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society during fall 2008 and spring 2009. Phi Theta Kappa membership is offered to students in recognition of their academic achievement as early as possible during their enrollment at a community college. The general criteria for membership in Phi Theta Kappa require that students complete 12 credit hours with an average GPA of 3.5. Members are similar demographically to other community college students and nearly half receive Pell grant assistance and have taken at least one developmental course.

This completion and transfer study consisted of tracking a cohort of over 11,000 member students from the year 2008/2009. Members were randomly selected and sample sizes were adjusted to be large enough to track, with confidence, the activity of members after transferring to four-year colleges. Six-year completion and transfer outcomes were computed using data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Student-Tracker database, and using methods similar to those used in previous studies of completion and transfer of community college students (Jenkins & Fink, 2016, Shapiro et al., 2014, 2015).

This is the second year that Phi Theta Kappa has tracked member cohorts to determine student success outcomes. Results reported here are consistent with results from past studies. All results are significant at the 0.05 level, unless otherwise noted. In this study, members were found to have an overall completion rate of 85% and a transfer-out (and still enrolled at the four year institution) of 7%, thus an overall student success rate of 92%. Members also significantly outperformed students with similar grade point averages. Further, among those who transferred, members significantly out-performed the bachelor's degree completion rates of native four-year college students. Major findings included:

- The overall six-year completion rate of Phi Theta Kappa members was 85%. The NSC six-year completion rate of all community college students is 40% (Shapiro et al., 2014).



- The rate of Phi Theta Kappa members transferring to a four-year college or university is 71%. Community college students transfer at a rate of 33% (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).



- The Phi Theta Kappa member six-year bachelor's degree completion rate was 68% and 78% of members either completed a bachelor's degree or were still enrolled at a university at the end of six years. The bachelor's degree completion rate of community college transfers is 42% (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).



## Prior Research

While nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled at community colleges, only a small percentage go on to complete a degree of any kind (AACC, 2014). This trend has serious implications for the economy and for individuals. One report projects that the United States will fall short 16 million degrees to match foreign nations and to meet future workforce needs (Price, 2014). The NSC recently published a study which found that of the 33% of first-time students who begin at a community college and transfer to a four-year institution, only 4% transfer with an associate's degree or other credential (Shapiro, 2015).

Measuring completion and student success poses many challenges for community college policy makers, including which instruments most accurately reflect the true achievement of students. The U.S. Department of Education counts only full-time, first-time degree seekers who enroll in the fall semester and remain with the same institution until completion at 150%, or three years, of normal program completion time. These numbers do not account for the fact that many community college students do not enroll for the first time in the fall, are not first-time students, are enrolled part-time, or do not plan to attain a degree or certificate; nor does it account for the large numbers of community college students who plan to transfer to a 4-year institution (Juszkiewicz, 2015). The NSC reports completion rates using a much different formula. Its statistics take into consideration a longer completion time (300% or six years) and tracks students across multiple institutions.

Community colleges have long held transfer preparedness as an essential and indispensable part of their mission (Mullin, 2012). While community college leaders and policy makers continue to seek ways to retain students and encourage completion of an associate degree or certificate, the vast majority of first-time, freshman community college students express a goal to obtain a four year degree (Handel, 2013). According to recent reports by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and the NSC, 40% of community college students complete any degree within six years of beginning school, 33% of community college students transfer to a four-year college or university and, of those who transfer, 42% complete a bachelor's degree (CCRC, 2016). The work of the CCRC and the NSC has been foundational for understanding where degree completion and transfer metrics truly are for community colleges, and provide essential metrics for determining the effectiveness of Phi Theta Kappa in providing opportunities for students to grow as scholars and leaders, and in creating financial pathways to bachelor's degrees for its members.

### Comparison to Native Four-Year Students

Our analysis also determined that Phi Theta Kappa transfers significantly out-performed the native four-year student completion rates. Members had a completion rate of 68% at the end of six years, and native university students had a six-year completion rate of 63%. Also, at the end of the six years of tracking, an additional 10% of members were still enrolled at the four-year college or university. Outperforming completion rates of native four-year students is significant, as many community college transfers experience a loss of credit when transferring to a four-year institution. In a detailed analysis of credit transfer within the Beginning Postsecondary Students 04/09 database, community college students lost an average of 24% of their credits when transferring to four-year institutions (Simone, 2014).

For many community college students, the very act of transferring to a new school is a difficult adjustment. Some research refers to this as “transfer shock” as students generally experience less success in the first semester subsequent to transfer (Hills, 1965). Beyond academics, students also must adjust socially and to new learning environments, services, and living situations (Laanan, 1996).

### Phi Theta Kappa Completion Rates

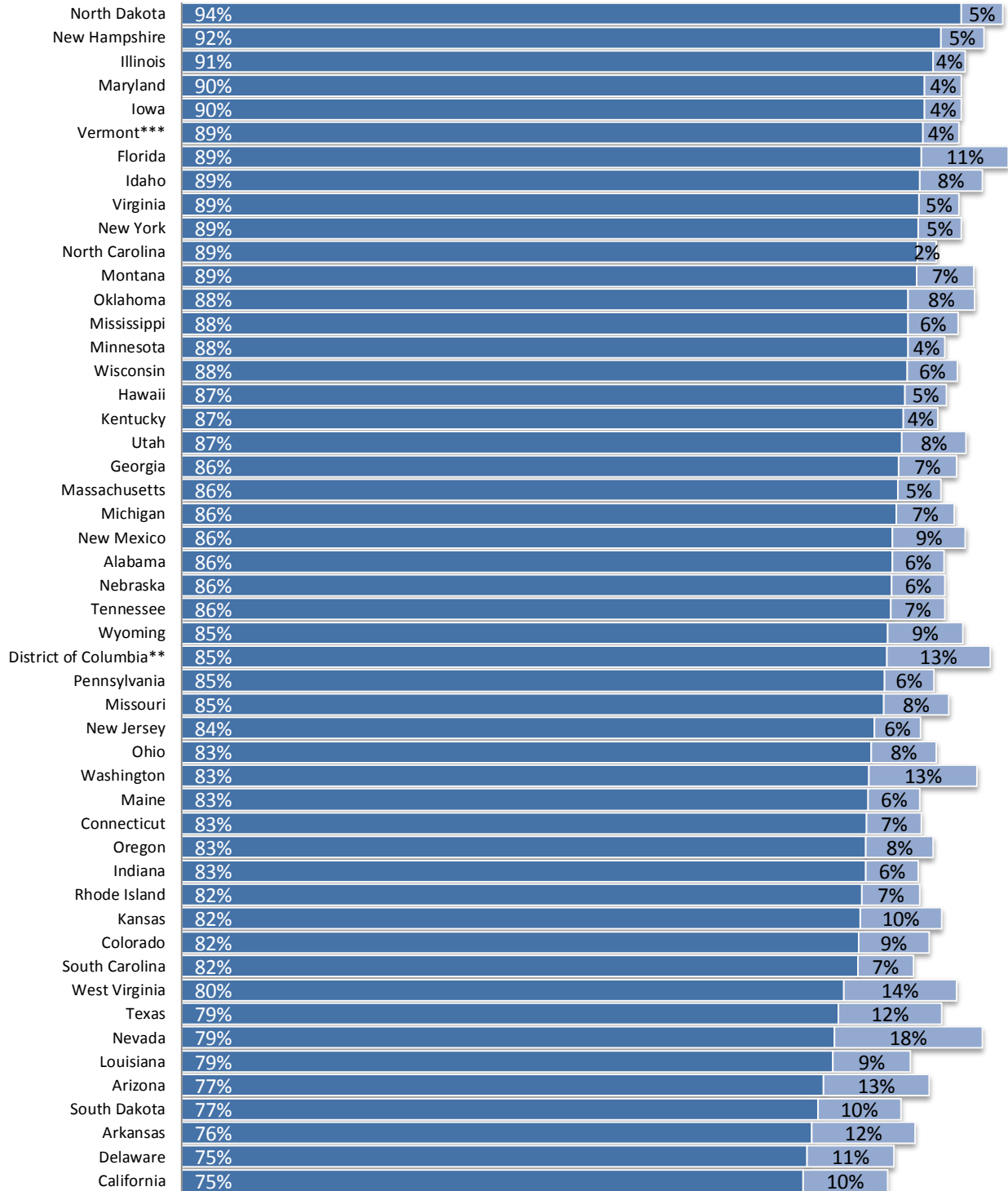
The central purpose of this study was to investigate the completion and transfer outcomes of Phi Theta Kappa members. To accomplish this, random samples of members were tracked for six years. Over 11,000 members were involved in the study. The study revealed that Phi Theta Kappa members have a 92% student success rate (completion rate of 85% and transfer-out and still-enrolled rate of 7%). Members were found to be over three times more likely to complete than all community college students within three years and within six years were over twice as likely to complete college when compared to all community college students.

While requirements vary from chapter to chapter, students must have a minimum of 12 credit hours, and on average, a 3.5 GPA or higher to be offered membership. Ideally, a comparison of completion rates to those with these criteria is desirable. To compare members to other community college students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher, the NCES BPS 04/09 database was utilized. The six-year completion outcome of Phi Theta Kappa members was 85%, and the results from the BPS 04/09 database estimated six-year completion outcome of community college students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher was 58%. The differences were significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## Phi Theta Kappa Completion and Transfer Outcomes by State

### Completion and Transfer-Out Rates

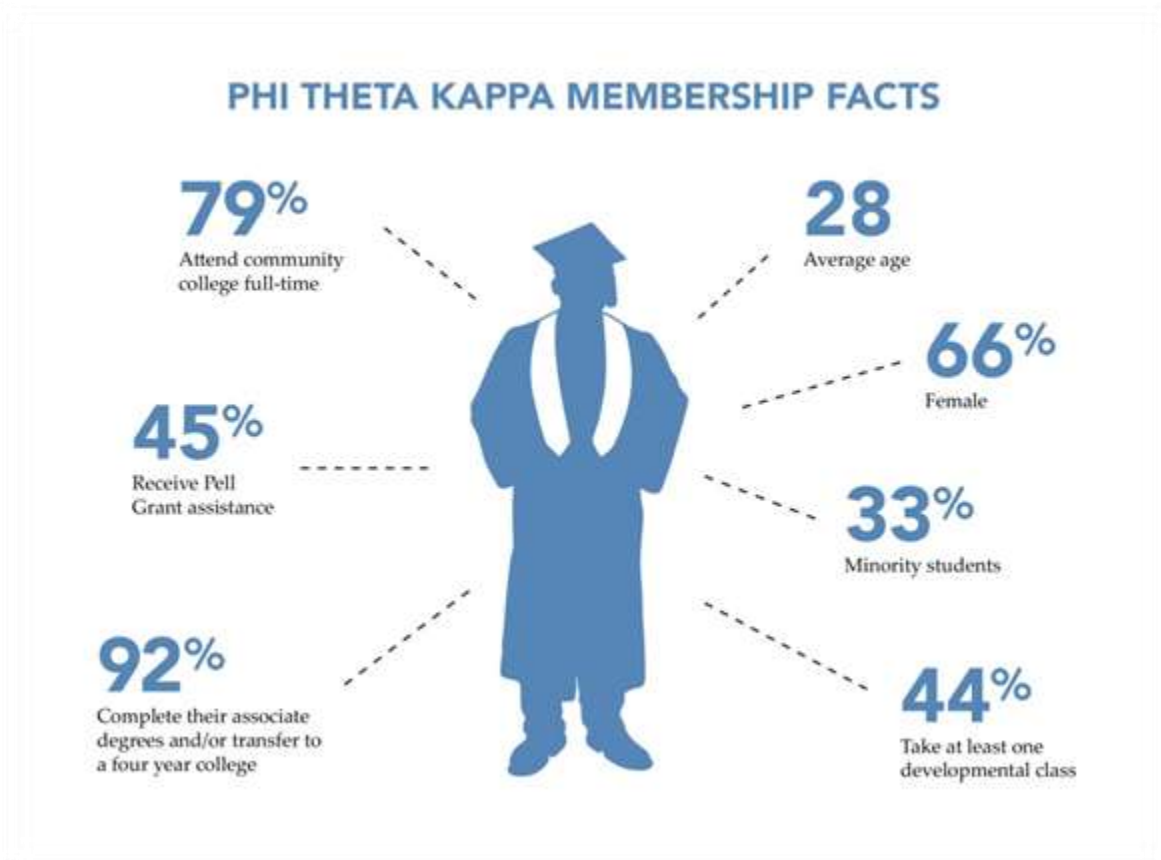
■ Six Year Completion Rate ■ Transfer-Out Rate



Notes on state-by-state rates: \*Alaska sample adequate for  $\pm 0.06$  precision in results; \*\* District of Columbia sample adequate for  $\pm 0.07$  precision in results; \*\*\* Vermont sample adequate for  $\pm 0.08$  precision in results.

### About Phi Theta Kappa

For nearly a century, Phi Theta Kappa has provided recognition of academic achievement of community college students, as early as possible and often during the student's first year. It is important to note that Phi Theta Kappa's demographics are not tilted toward those with higher socioeconomic status, and members are nearly as likely to receive some type of college-preparatory developmental coursework as other community college students. It is for students who exist on every campus who achieve more, engage more, and want to make the very best of the time they spend in a community college.



In many ways, Phi Theta Kappa members are not very different from other community college students. While members are very similar in age and gender when compared to all community college students, members are slightly less diverse, and somewhat less likely to receive federal funding. However, members do differ greatly from the average community college student in one major way—79% members attend full-time and only 39% of community college students are classified as full-time students (AACC, 2015a). The dominance in Phi Theta Kappa by full-time students contributes to the group having increased completion rates. It is well known that

at the institutional level, community colleges with higher concentrations of full-time students tend to have higher completion rates (Bailey et al., 2005; Calcagno et al., 2008; Drukin & Kitcher, 2010; Jacoby, 2006).

After accepting membership, members are exposed to numerous choices in activities that stimulate their success. Examples of activities include leadership opportunities on local, regional, and international levels; service learning; honors programming; soft-skill professional development; and transfer readiness. Transfer success is further stimulated by access to member-only transfer scholarships to four-year colleges and universities.

Transfer scholarships available to Phi Theta Kappa members can be found at: <http://bit.ly/1ICuRMT>. Each marker represents a transfer benefit. The green markers represent unlimited numbers of transfer scholarships to public universities, and red markers are universities that offer only a limited number of competitive scholarships. Phi Theta Kappa also provides opportunities for additional, competitive merit and need-based scholarships while students are still enrolled at the community college.

Phi Theta Kappa, headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi, is the largest honor society in higher education with 1,285 chapters on college campuses in all 50 of the United States, U.S. territorial possessions and eight sovereign nations. More than 3 million students have been inducted since its founding in 1918, with approximately 134,000 students inducted annually.

## References

American Association of Community Colleges. (2014). Empowering community colleges to build the nation's future: An implementation guide. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc21stcenturycenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04/EmpoweringCommunityColleges\\_final.pdf](http://www.aacc21stcenturycenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04/EmpoweringCommunityColleges_final.pdf)

American Association of Community Colleges. (2015a). 2015 Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FactSheet2015\\_grey.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FactSheet2015_grey.pdf)

American Association of Community Colleges. (2015b). Community College Completion Progress toward goal of 50% increase. Retrieved from [http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/trends/documents/completion\\_report\\_05212015.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/trends/documents/completion_report_05212015.pdf)

Bailey, T. R., Calcagno, J. C., Jenkins, D., Kienzl, G., & Leinbach, T. (2005). The effects of institutional factors on the success of community college students. Community College Research Center. Retrieved from <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=208>



- Calcagno, J., Bailey, T., Jenkins, D., Kienzl, G., & Leinbach, T. (2008). Community college student success: What institutional characteristics make a difference? *Economics Of Education Review*, 27(6), 632-645.
- Durkin, J., & Kircher A. (2010). Factors affecting community college completion rates. Education Advisory Board. Retrieved from: [http://po.linnbenton.edu/completionagenda/taskforce/Factors\\_Affecting\\_Community\\_College\\_Completion\\_Rates\\_cclf.pdf](http://po.linnbenton.edu/completionagenda/taskforce/Factors_Affecting_Community_College_Completion_Rates_cclf.pdf)
- Handel, S. J. (2013). The transfer moment: The pivotal partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions in securing the nation's college completion agenda. *New Directions For Higher Education*, 162, 5-15.
- Hills, J. R. (1965). Transfer shock: The academic performance of the junior college transfer. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 33 (Spring), 201-216.
- Jacoby, D. (2006). Effects of part-time faculty employment on community college graduate rates. *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(6), 1081-1103.
- Jenkins, D. & Fink, J. (2016). Tracking transfer new measures of institutional and state effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees. New York, NY: Community College Research Center.
- Juszkiewicz, J. (2015). Trends in community college enrollment and completion data, 2015, Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Laanan, F. S. (1996). Making the transition: Understanding the adjustment process of community college transfer students. *Community College Review*, 23(4), 69-84.
- Mullin, C. M. (2012). Transfer: An indispensable part of the community college mission (Policy Brief 2012-03PBL). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Simone, S.A. (2014). Transferability of postsecondary credit following student transfer or coenrollment (NCES 2014-163).
- Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Ziskin, M., Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. (2014, March). Completing college: A state-level view of student attainment rates (Signature Report No. 6a). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K, Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. (2015, July). Transfer and mobility: A national view of student movement in postsecondary institutions, fall 2008 cohort (Signature Report No. 9). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.