

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS, INEQUITABLE JOURNEYS

Differing pathways to earning a degree drive inequitable outcomes in New York State's higher education system

A college degree not only increases graduates' opportunities for economic mobility, it can also put them on a path toward financial security and earning a family-sustaining wage.

Yet across New York State, college students find themselves on a number of different "pathways" through college, with some far more likely to ultimately lead to a degree than others.

Now more than ever, economic opportunity and financial security are intertwined with degree attainment. In order to improve postsecondary outcomes and ensure more equity in New York's higher education system, the state's secondary and postsecondary institutions must first look at the unique pathways students are experiencing and find ways to help more students successfully complete a high-quality degree or credential.

A student's pathway toward their first college degree (Associate's or Bachelor's) is marked by key "events" that represent important steps and transitions on a student's journey. While every student is different and therefore makes their own unique decisions throughout their education, there are common "events" that students may experience, including transfers and stop outs.

In order to learn more about students' differing pathways, the REACH NY network of civil rights, student-serving, veteran, education, and civic organizations analyzed data for students who

are estimated to have graduated from New York State high schools in 2012 and 2013, enrolled the following fall in a New York college or university, and participated in the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) from their first semester through the events and outcomes that typically lead students toward their first degree.

Our analysis found that about 1 in 3 (29%) students who continuously persisted from enrollment to graduation earned a degree on time, compared to more than 2 in 3 (71%) students' whose experiences included transfer(s) and/or stop-outs(s). These findings suggest that students who transfer or stop out are less likely to graduate on time or within 150% of normal completion time than students who continuously persist to graduation.

The analysis also points to one critical piece to addressing an issue first identified in REACH NY's 2020 report [*Aiming Higher: How improving equity and attainment will put New York State on the path to a bright future*](#), which highlighted the persistent inequities throughout New York State's postsecondary pipeline that demand an equity-driven solution. That report served as an impetus for the network to call on New York State leaders to adopt a 60% statewide attainment goal for New Yorkers of all races and ethnicities by 2030.

The adoption and achievement of an attainment goal would help New York State meet the demands of an evolving economy while also addressing the

systemic inequities that have prevented historically underserved students from reaching success in college and beyond.

Improving postsecondary attainment and working toward that goal must first start with examining student pathways.

Defining Pathways

A college pathway is defined by the events that take place throughout a student's journey toward their first degree. In this report, we focus on the cohort of students who are estimated to have graduated from New York State high schools in 2012 and 2013, enrolled the following fall in a New York college or university, and participated in the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). These students began enrollment in either Fall 2012 or Spring 2013 and this analysis follows their pathways term by term over 14 total terms, ending in Spring 2019.

Between terms, we capture the events that take place based on what institutions students are enrolled in from Fall to the following Spring or Spring to the following Fall. The analysis tracks students' movements using an anonymized education code that allows us to determine the events taking place in between terms based on the relationship between the institutions that students are enrolled from term to term.

The events we refer to in this report are as follows:

- **Continuous persistence:** Student is enrolled in the same institution continuously until graduation;

- **Transferred at least once (no stop-out):** At one point on the pathway, the student was enrolled in a different institution from the one they were enrolled in during the previous term;
- **Stopped out at least once (no transfer):** At one point on the pathway, the student was not enrolled in any institution for at least one term (can be for any period of terms); and,
- **Transferred at least once and stopped out at least once:** At one point on the pathway, the student enrolled in a different institution from the one they were enrolled in during the previous term and at another point on their pathway, the student was not enrolled in any institution for at least one term.

Each student has taken one of these mutually exclusive pathways toward their first degree. While this report focuses on the postsecondary outcomes of graduation with either an Associate's or Bachelor's degree, it does not suggest that this is the only or ideal outcome for all students in higher education.

In addition to looking at whether students graduated or did not graduate, the analysis considered postsecondary outcomes by on-time graduation or graduation within 150% of normal completion time to determine which pathways were more likely to lead to a graduation outcome and which pathways were more likely to lead to a non-graduation outcome.

Among the findings of the analysis:

FINDING 1

The most common pathway for students starting in Fall 2012 or Spring 2013, regardless of outcomes, is stopping out at least once without transferring.

However, the most common pathway leading to graduation is continuous persistence.



Figure 1. Postsecondary Outcomes for Different Pathways toward First Degree Completed for Students Starting in Fall 2012

	AA Grad	AA Grad OT	AA Grad 150	BA Grad	BA Grad OT	BA Grad 150	Total Grad	Total Grad OT	Total Grad 150	No Grad	Total
Continuous persistence (no transfer, no stop-out)	26%	9%	22%	74%	55%	74%	99%	65%	96%	99%	20,550
Transferred at least once (no stop-out)	42%	16%	32%	55%	29%	55%	97%	44%	87%	97%	9,847
Stopped out at least once (no transfer)	13%	1%	4%	11%	3%	10%	23%	4%	14%	23%	28,629
Transferred at least once + stopped at least once	19%	4%	8%	17%	4%	15%	36%	7%	24%	36%	8,685
Total	14,625	4,018	9,623	25,126	15,471	24,740	39,751	19,489	34,363	39,751	67,711

Figure 2. Postsecondary Outcomes for Different Pathways toward First Degree Completed for Students Starting in Spring 2013

	AA Grad	AA Grad OT	AA Grad 150	BA Grad	BA Grad OT	BA Grad 150	Total Grad	Total Grad OT	Total Grad 150	No Grad	Total
Continuous persistence (no transfer, no stop-out)	70%	12%	45%	28%	14%	28%	99%	26%	74%	1%	640
Transferred at least once (no stop-out)	56%	11%	40%	39%	12%	39%	95%	23%	79%	5%	375
Stopped out at least once (no transfer)	9%	1%	2%	3%	2%	3%	12%	3%	6%	88%	4,015
Transferred at least once + stopped at least once	16%	1%	5%	10%	5%	10%	26%	6%	14%	74%	556
Total	1,101	152	562	518	247	515	1,619	399	1,077	3,967	5,586

*Key for the following abbreviations: AA: Associate's degree; BA: Bachelor's degree; Grad: Graduation by Spring 2019; Grad OT: On-time graduation (within two years for Associate's degrees and four years for Bachelor's degrees); Grad 150: Graduation within 150% of normal completion time (within three years for Associate's degrees and six years for Bachelor's degrees); Total Grad: Total percentage of graduates (Associate's and Bachelor's); and No Grad: Percentage of students who did not graduate.

** Additional note: On-time graduation and graduation within 150% of normal completion time percentages will not equate to Graduation by 2019 percentages because Graduation by 2019 percentages are inclusive of graduation within 150% of normal completion which is also inclusive of on-time graduation.



FINDING 2

Students are most likely to complete their degrees at the same type of institution as the institution where they began their education.

The data reveal a high number of students earning degrees started and ended at the same type of institution.

Both CUNY and SUNY 4-year institutions have high retention rates, ensuring that the students that start within these schools end up at the same 4-year institutions. However, the completion rates are lower when students start at a CUNY or SUNY 2-Year

institution. This reveals that while public institutions are doing well in supporting their current students, there are opportunities to strengthen the transfer pathway between institutions.

There is still a significant number of students transitioning from a 4-year to a 2-year institution or transferring to a non-public/out-of-state institution. This data reveals that institutions must consider how they can better support Associate’s degree-seeking students so they are able to complete their degrees regardless of the control of the institution where they graduate.

Figure 3. Pathways by Type of Institution toward an Associate’s Degree (n = 17,243)

	Complete at CUNY 2-Year Institution	Complete at CUNY 4-Year Institution	Complete at SUNY 2-Year Institution	Complete at SUNY 4-Year Institution	Complete at Non-public Institution
Start at CUNY 2-Year Institution	82%	11%	1%	2%	4%
Start at CUNY 4-Year Institution	28%	58%	4%	1%	9%
Start at SUNY 2-Year Institution	1%	0%	68%	7%	24%
Start at SUNY 4-Year Institution	5%	2%	21%	65%	7%

“ These findings highlight the need to strengthen supports around critical inflection points in a student’s higher education pathway.



Figure 4. Pathways by Type of Institution toward a Bachelor's Degree (n = 25,480)

	Complete at CUNY 2-Year Institution	Complete at CUNY 4-Year Institution	Complete at SUNY 2-Year Institution	Complete at SUNY 4-Year Institution	Complete at Non-public Institution
Start at CUNY 2-Year Institution	1%	64%	0%	15%	20%
Start at CUNY 4-Year Institution	0%	91%	0%	4%	4%
Start at SUNY 2-Year Institution	0%	5%	2%	59%	35%
Start at SUNY 4-Year Institution	0%	3%	0%	91%	6%

Ensuring more equitable pathways:

These findings highlight the need to strengthen supports around critical inflection points in a student's higher education pathway. Doing so would also improve access to and through higher education, especially for students who have been historically underserved by our higher education system.

In order for New York to ensure that more students are on the pathway toward success and prepared to meet the labor demands of the 21st century, the state should pursue an ambitious postsecondary equity agenda that includes:

- Adopting a statewide attainment goal of 60% of all New York residents, in all regions and of all races and ethnicities with a high-quality credential or degree by 2030;
- Creating interim benchmarks to measure its progress along the attainment goal, especially by race and ethnicity;
- Implementing a statewide early childhood-to-workforce data system to support institutions in identifying and addressing potential equity gaps along

the education-to-workforce pipeline. This data system should include important postsecondary outcome data such as enrollment, persistence, and completion as well as workforce indicators and should be disaggregated by key student characteristics, such as race and ethnicity.

In order to ensure students are on the pathway toward graduation, institutions should focus on the following:

- Establishing policies that help students achieve seamless transfers between institutions. While there are multiple pathways toward postsecondary completion, students should not be burdened by the transition process between institutions. These policies can include guaranteeing credit for prior learning based on workforce and other experiences that could translate into college credit, as well as formalizing course equivalences by creating databases for shared statewide definitions of course descriptions that can be broadly applied across institutions;



- Improving access to academic and non-academic advising and support that is culturally-responsive and trauma-informed;
- Building upon re-entry supports so that students who are taking a break from their education will be able to pick up where they left off, without missing a step on their pathway toward a degree. Institutions should also practice more flexible policies around re-entry and credit retention;
- Ensuring that students can readily access resources to help them meet basic needs such as food, housing, and tuition to improve retention rates. These kinds of financial or student development supports are necessary for students' overall wellbeing, which is necessary for any kind of postsecondary success;
- Redesigning courses and creating academic paths that are more likely to lead to meaningful careers that pay a living wage;
- Identifying and scaling programs that aim to improve completion rates for transfer students such as the CUNY Academic

Momentum Campaign 2.0, a systemwide commitment to increasing transfer completion rates across New York City. This campaign, launched by the CUNY School System, aims to increase transfer completion from the point of Associate's degree entry to Bachelor's degree or from the point of transfer to Bachelor's degree. The campaign aims to establish a foundation for seamless and timely transfer through expanded course equivalences and better-aligned curriculum across degree pathways. The plan also includes earlier and more integrated transfer advisement, as well as increased supports both during and after the transfer process;

New York faces two related challenges: our overall level of college attainment is not keeping up with the needs of our economy, and systemic attainment barriers prevent historically underserved groups of New Yorkers – those who are from low-income backgrounds, communities of color, and others – from earning a college degree or high-quality, industry-recognized workforce credential.

Learn more at EdTrustNY.org/REACH

