

Timing of Concentration, Completion, and Exit in Community Colleges

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Colleges should know when their students reach important milestones.

To develop policies aimed at increasing student success and institutional effectiveness, it is useful for colleges to understand when students reach significant academic milestones, what students do if they exit college before completion, and whether the timing of these events differs among students with different levels of academic preparedness. Research suggests that students who reach important milestones early in their college careers are more likely than others to achieve their education goals (Edgecombe, 2011). And knowing when particular kinds of students reach academic milestones (or when they exit college without attaining a degree) can shed light on common patterns of student progression (Moore & Shulock, 2009).

This report examines how the timing of important events in community college student progression—reaching program concentration by earning nine college-level credits in a single area of study, completing a program of study, and exiting college prior to program completion—differs by students who upon entry to college are deemed college ready or are referred to developmental education in either one, two, or three subject areas. It also examines the timing of additional post-exit education outcomes of students who leave their first college prior to program completion.

Using five years of course-level transcript data on 14,617 first-time-in-college students who in the 2005-06 academic year enrolled in one of eight community colleges across three different states, this descriptive analysis identifies in which term students at various levels of college preparedness reached program concentration, earned a degree or certificate, or exited college without completing a program. Students who entered community college as college ready in math, reading, and writing (16 percent of students in the sample) are compared to students who were referred to developmental education in one (32 percent), two (21 percent), or all three (31 percent) of those subject areas.

Findings

Program Concentration

Previous research indicates that students who concentrate in a program of study within the first year are much more likely to earn a credential than are those who concentrate in subsequent terms (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Because students referred to developmental courses must usually complete

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DEFINITION

REACHING PROGRAM CONCENTRATION

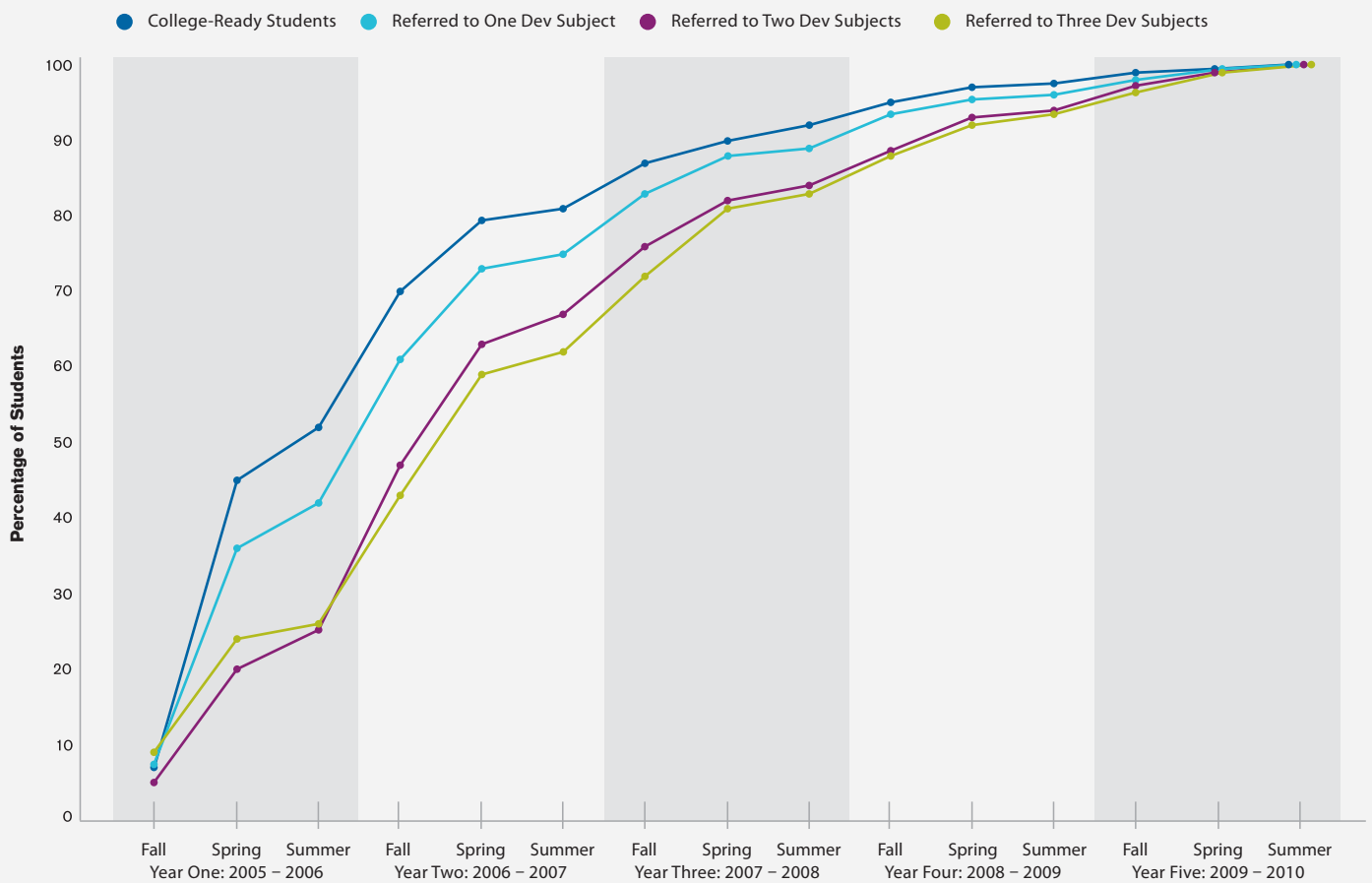
A student reaches program concentration once they have accumulated at least nine college credits in a single area of study.

non-credit developmental course requirements prior to enrolling in many college-level, credit-granting courses, it is reasonable to expect that students designated as college-ready would concentrate in a program sooner than their developmental counterparts, which was confirmed in our analysis.

We define “reaching program concentration” as accumulating at least nine college credits in a single area of study. About 46 percent of the total sample reached program concentration within five years. As shown in Figure 1, among those students in the sample who reached program concentration within five years, 52 percent of college-ready students did so within just one year, compared to 42 percent of those referred to one developmental subject and 26 percent of those referred to two or to three developmental subjects.

These trends support the notion that developmental education increases the amount of time students need to reach academic milestones, causing them to lag behind their college-ready peers. As shown in Figure 1, students referred to multiple developmental subjects, on average, lagged almost a full year behind college-ready students. It is important to note that although the lag between these groups of students continues through several years, each group converges to 100 percent toward the end of the five-year period because only students who reached program concentration by this time were included in the subset represented in the figure.

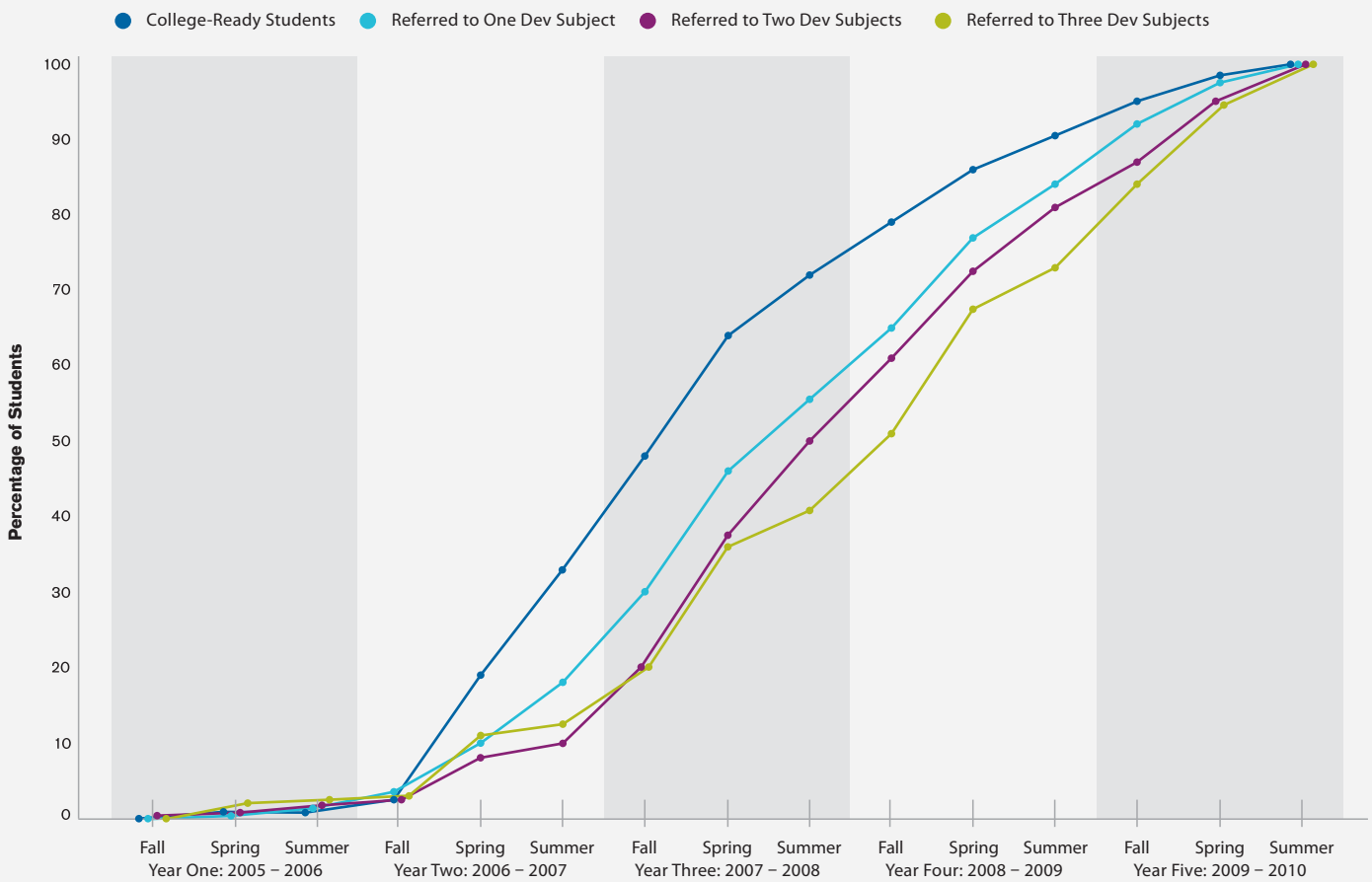
Figure 1. Proportion of students who reached program concentration, among those who did so within 5 years



Program Completion

About 16 percent of the total sample completed a program and received an award from their community college within five years of initial enrollment. As shown in Figure 2, among these program completers, college-ready students on average earned their degrees or certificates sooner than their developmental peers. By the spring of 2008, nearly three years after entry, over 60 percent of college-ready program completers had received an award. The developmental program completers did not reach the 60 percent mark until the following academic year. This lag in program completion among students who were referred to developmental education is not surprising given the year-long lag in reaching program concentration discussed above.

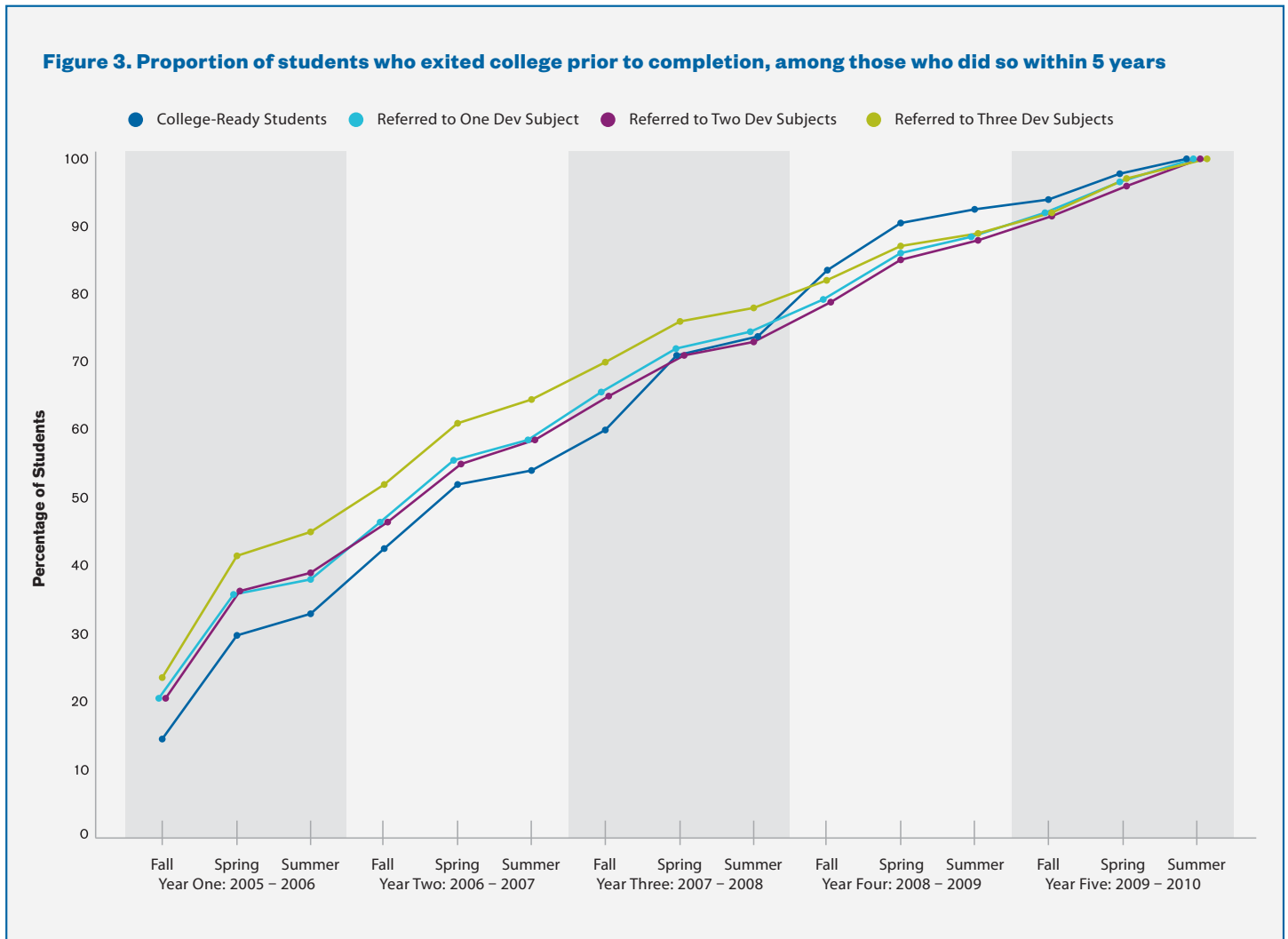
Figure 2. Proportion of students who completed a program, among those who did so within 5 years



Institutional Exit

About 68 percent of the total sample left their community college prior to program completion. As shown in Figure 3, among these students, a greater proportion of students referred to three developmental subject areas exited during each of the first three years, compared to students referred to fewer or no developmental subject areas. For example, among students referred to three developmental subjects, the majority, 52 percent, exited by the end of fall term of their second year (fall 2006), compared with 48 percent of students referred to one or two developmental subjects and with 43 percent of college-ready students. This suggests that students who are referred to the most amount of developmental coursework are those who leave college (before program completion) the earliest.

Figure 3. Proportion of students who exited college prior to completion, among those who did so within 5 years



This analysis also identifies when students exited their community college (prior to program completion) based on their future institutional trajectories. As shown in Figure 4, future outcomes within five years include: (1) earned a certificate or associate degree from another institution, (2) transferred to a four-year institution without receiving an award from that institution, (3) earned a bachelor’s degree from another institution, and (4) no longer was enrolled in any higher education institution.

Figure 4. Proportion of students by outcome who exited college prior to completion, among those who did so within 5 years

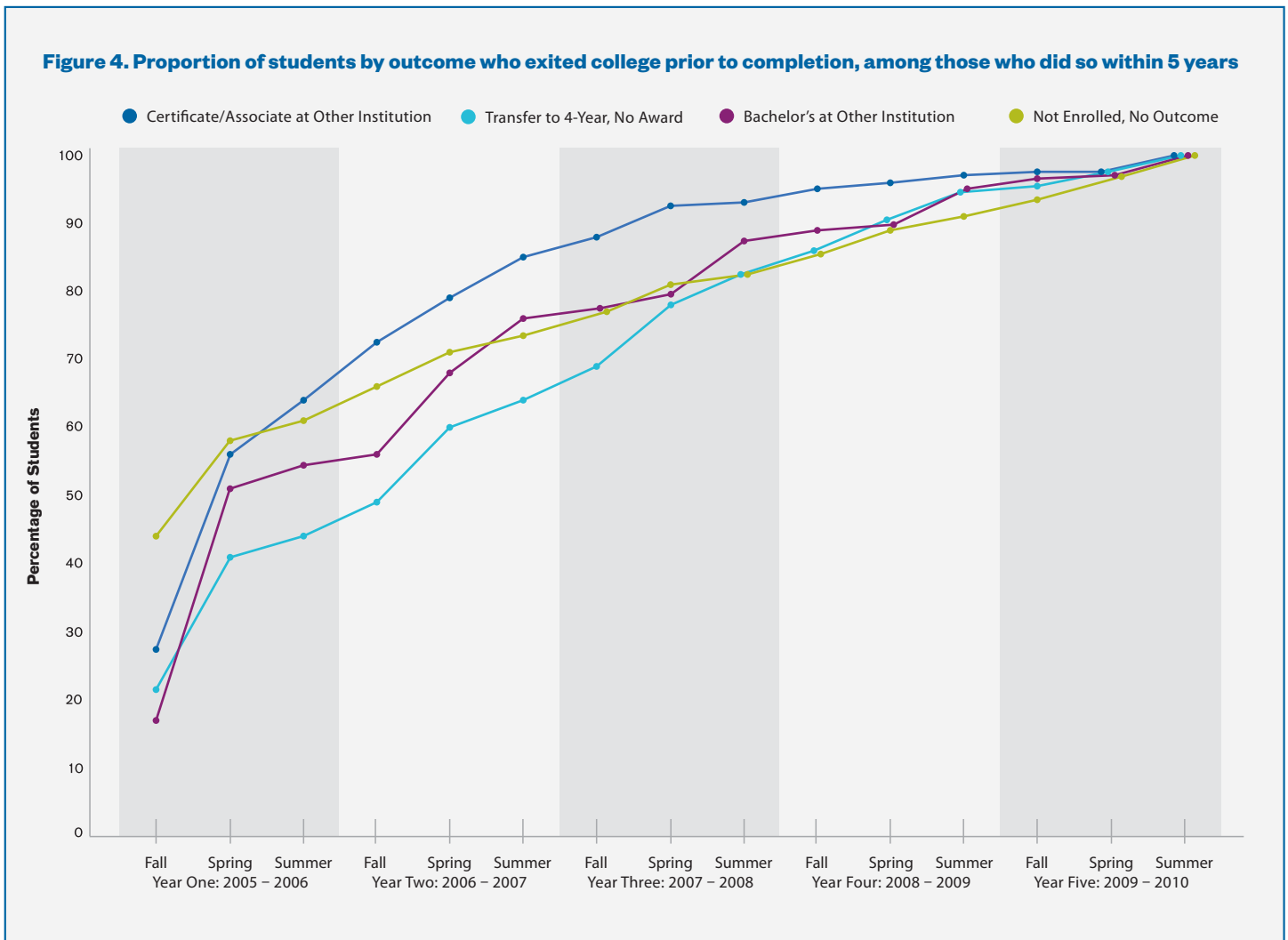
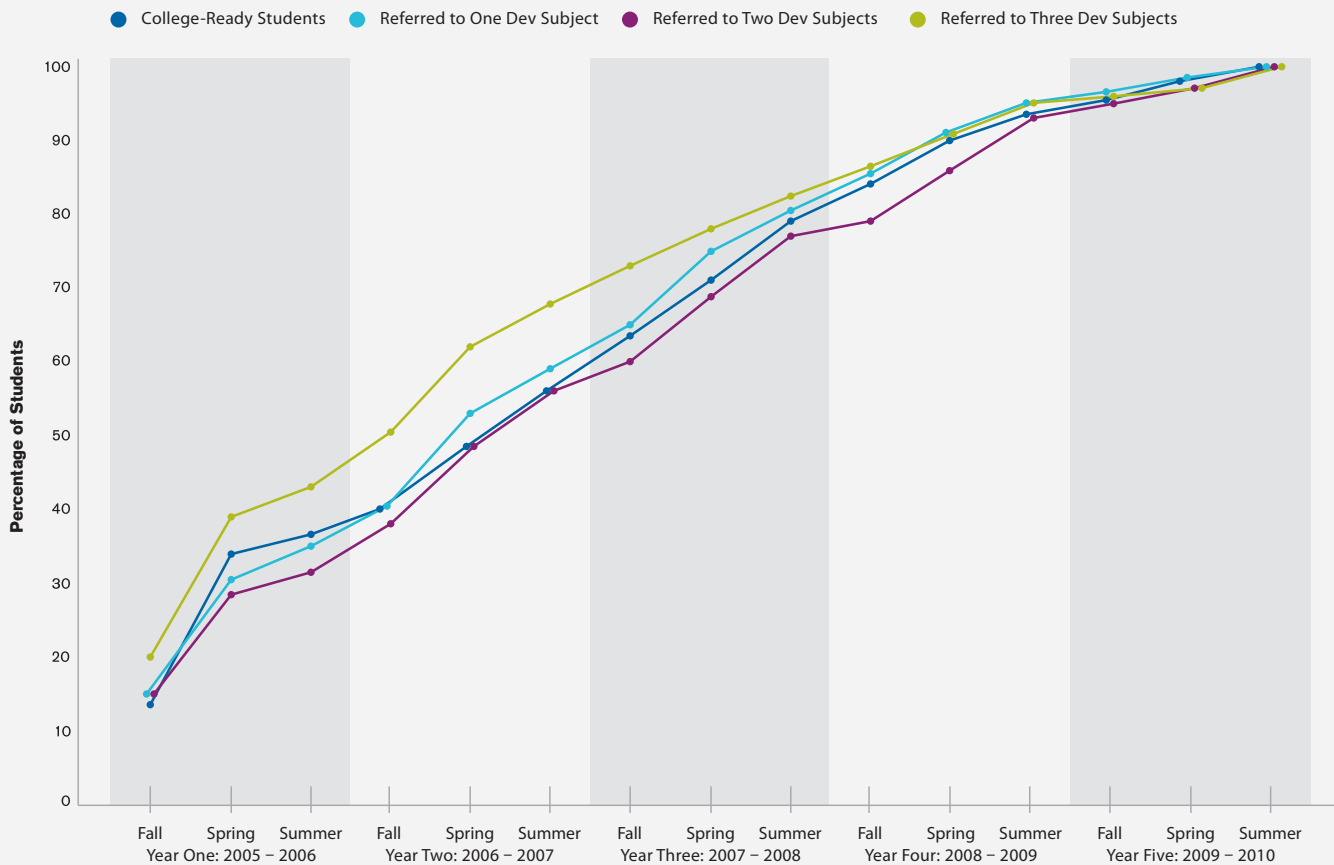


Figure 4 shows that among students who eventually received a certificate or associate degree at another institution, the majority, 56 percent, left the community college by the spring term of the first year. Among those who eventually earned a bachelor’s degree at another institution without first receiving a credential at the community college, 51 percent exited by the spring term of their first year. About 60 percent of those who transferred to a four-year college without earning an award in five years exited their community college by the spring term of the second year. This pattern suggests that many students who exit their community college prior to program completion and go on to pursue postsecondary education at another institution tend to leave their community college very early on.

We also identify the term of transfer among college-level and developmental students who, prior to program completion, transferred to a four-year college (regardless of whether or not they completed a bachelor’s degree there). As shown in Figure 5, students referred to three developmental subject areas were among the first to transfer, with the majority, 51 percent, doing so by the fall term of the second year. It may be the case that many such developmental students were engaging in strategic behaviors to avoid developmental coursework by transferring to non-selective four-year colleges. By contrast, it is not until the summer term of the second year that the majority of the remaining students transferred to four-year institutions.

Figure 5. Proportion of college-ready and developmental students who transferred to a four-year college prior to completion, among those who did so within 5 years



Discussion and Conclusion

Using transcript data, these descriptive results show that, as expected, students who entered community college as college-ready reached two important academic milestones—program concentration and program completion—sooner than their counterparts who were referred to developmental education. The analysis demonstrates that referrals to developmental education, particularly to multiple subjects, are related to substantial delays in attaining successful outcomes.

Moreover, although this study does not address whether such delays impact persistence more generally, the analysis clearly shows that the majority of decisions about institutional exit prior to degree completion were made early on among students referred to developmental education. This was even true relative to the decision to transfer. Indeed, on average, developmental students who transferred to a four-year college did so sooner than college-ready students who transferred. Overall, the majority of students who exited their community college did so within two years of entry.

In considering these results, it would be helpful to better understand students' intent upon entry, as some students may have achieved their goals in a short period of time. Still, if colleges aim to increase persistence in higher education and to encourage more favorable outcomes, the findings suggest a need to guide and influence behaviors and decisions of students immediately upon entry. Particular attention should be paid to underprepared students, as these students are most likely to exit early on. Furthermore, colleges should strive to better understand intentions of students who transfer prior to program completion.

References

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