MCC Student Retention Patterns

Summary of Findings
1997-98 to 2001-02

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The Metropolitan Community Colleges
Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment
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A Summary of Findings

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AY1997-98 to AY2001-02

Why Provide a Report about Student Retention?

This is a technical report written for the district community to show how retention influences MCC enrollment. Retention is about students, their enrollment patterns, selection of courses and use of campus services. The term retention is always seen as a number or percentage that is compared with other numbers and percentages from like-institutions often called "peers". Institutional leaders are concerned about retention, especially if "the number" or "percentage" of students "carried over" from one reporting period to another does not meet a requisite percentage. Admissions personnel have always known that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to "out recruit retention". What they are saying is that as students leave the institution, a like number should be entering so as to create a harmonious cycle of student entry and exit. Institutions that are "open admissions" have greater difficulty understanding the concern, especially when employees see long lines during semester registration. Open admissions institutions also have the benefit of returning "stop-outs", or those students that may have attended a fall semester but did not return for the spring. Several semesters later they appear for enrollment and lessen the financial burden of leaving students by their infusion of tuition dollars. On the other hand, private institutions understand very well the importance of retention because the loss of a student is reflected in monetary terms, such as reduced tuition income. Institutions that are selective either through their admissions policy or cost do not have the benefit of large numbers of students who return after "stopping-out". Their enrollment must be "managed" so as to insure those students they admit and receive institutional funds for are comfortable with their institution; in other words the students have institutional "fit".

What is Retention and How is it Defined and Reported?

Retention is a means of showing student commitment to a college as well as implied course, program, service and institutional satisfaction. Students show commitment to an institution by spending their dollars for tuition, books, fees and other activities associated with college learning; in other words, students are educational consumers and in our community they have many choices.

Retention is generally reported using three measures: fall-to-spring retention; spring-to-fall retention, and fall-to-fall retention. Each measure has a definite way of presenting how the figures were developed and reported. For instance, fall-to-spring retention refers to the number of students enrolled during the fall semester that re-enrolled for the subsequent spring semester. The figure to calculate the retention excludes any students that completed an award. Excluding students who earned an award provides what is called the "adjusted retention rate". A similar calculation is used to determine both
spring-to-fall and fall-to-fall rates of retention. Retention is always reported as a percentage; such as, the adjusted fall-to-spring rate of retention for the college was 65 percent.

Why Use only Three Retention Rates?

Although retention is a term that is used universally within higher education there are only three established enrollment patterns that are used to measure retention rates: fall-to-spring; spring-to-fall; and fall-to-fall. Additional patterns of attendance are normally seen through longitudinal studies or studies of student persistence. For instance, the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) is a federally mandated survey that reports the number of first-time, full-time students that have either graduated, transferred, continue to be enrolled, or are not enrolled after six consecutive semesters. The GRS differs from this report in that it is a report based on the persistence of a cohort of first-time, full-time students rather than retention. Other studies have examined specific characteristics that are associated with a student's propensity to remain enrolled; such as, studies of departure, conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate attrition, and student engagement, to name a few.

Why is Retention Important for a College?

As has been stated, retention is measured through the tendency of students to continually enroll at a college or university. The goal of any retention effort is to insure that once a student makes a financial, personal and temporal commitment to attend, an institution will do everything it can to insure that student continues to enroll. The continuous enrollment is important on several levels: first, it keeps students enrolled in courses and programs; second, it provides an indication of the recruitment efforts to maintain current enrollment patterns; and third, it reflects the time-to-completion patterns of students. A favorable rate of retention speaks to institutional viability by creating an atmosphere of engagement that encourages students to stay enrolled and complete programs. Favorable retention rates also enable the institution to maintain or expand its current staffing of both instructional and support personnel. It should be noted that a high retention number might suggest a commitment to the institution but does not speak to student ability or motivation. Student motivation is an essential ingredient for student persistence and courses and programs are strengthened by a student's commitment to "stay the course" and complete a program of study. However, open admissions institutions must also deal with retention rates and the perplexities of dealing with a student population of which 70 percent are part-time students. Part-time students pose considerable challenges because in addition to the academic rigor required, there are other issues such as, they are older, work while attending, have the complications of young children and access to affordable daycare, to name a few.

MCC Retention.

As mentioned previously, retention rates are measured several different ways; fall-to-spring, spring-to-fall and fall-to-fall retention. Fall-to-spring retention is calculated by
finding all students who enrolled for the fall semester and re-enrolled for the spring semester. The percent enrolling in spring represents the proportion (or percent) that are continuing their education experience; thus, the fall-to-spring retention rate. However, a more precise figure would be to count the students returning in the spring less graduates; this figure becomes the "adjusted retention rate".

Fall-to-spring adjusted retention rates for MCC as a whole were stable over the past 5 years, ranging from 62% to 63%. Figure 1 provides an overview of the adjusted retention rates for the district and its four colleges. Notice that, with few exceptions, the adjusted retention rate for MCC and its colleges are within the range of 62 to 66 percent. The district-wide adjusted retention rate average is 63 percent, which is typical of an urban community college.

![Figure 1. Fall-to-Spring Retention](image)

- Spring to fall adjusted retention rates ranged from 50% to 51%. Figure 2 shows the adjusted rate of retention for spring-to-fall students from 1997 to 2001. Readers should note that the spring-to-fall rate of retention for the district, as well as for its colleges, all exhibit the same pattern rate for the five years noted.
Fall to fall adjusted retention rates for MCC ranged from 45 to 46 percent. This figure refers to the number of students that were enrolled for the fall semester and returned for the subsequent fall semester. Figure 3 shows the adjusted rate of retention patterns for fall-to-fall for the district and its colleges. Note the similarity in adjusted retention pattern.
Other Observations.

The following information represents an overview of student retention based on demographic and attendance variables. This information is helpful because it provides the reader with a view of the mosaic that represents the MCC student.

♦ Females and white students were retained at a higher rate than their counterparts (e.g., males students and minority students, respectively).

♦ Retention by age group was determined by using three groups as the point of analysis: traditional aged students, aged 24 years or less; students aged 25 to 34 years; and students aged 35 years or above. Traditional aged students (aged 24 or less), regardless of the campus, have retention rates that exceed the district and college average for all three measurement periods. While older students have lower rates of retention than the district or college average, those rates are not appreciably lower (2 to 4 points lower).

♦ Full-time students had considerably higher retention rates than those enrolled part-time. For instance, full-time students have fall-to-spring rates of retention that are 20 to 29 percentage points higher than part-time students. Spring-to-fall and fall-to-fall rates of retention vary from 15 to 20 percentage points when comparing full-time to part-time student retention.

♦ Students enrolled in both day and evening courses had higher retention rates than those enrolled exclusively during the day or the evening.

♦ Those enrolled in at least one developmental course tended to have higher retention rates than those not enrolled in a developmental course although there was no discernable pattern when examining fall to fall rates.

♦ An examination of semester GPA’s of those retained versus those not retained revealed that traditional age students, males and black students were more likely than their counterparts to exit MCC with a GPA less than 2.0.

♦ Full-time students were more likely than part-time students to leave MCC with a semester GPA of 2.0 or less.

♦ Students enrolled in a developmental course were more likely than those not enrolled in a developmental course to exit MCC with a semester GPA less than 2.0.

♦ Students enrolled exclusively during the day were more likely than those enrolled exclusively in the evening to leave MCC with a semester GPA of 2.0 or less.

Impact of Retention.

To describe the impact of this retention study in practical terms the following illustration may be helpful. From an enrollment management point of view, the analysis of each
semester’s enrollment needs to include data about several groups: first-time students; returning students; graduates; transfer students and stop-outs. First-time students are as their name implies, a first semester student at MCC. A returning student would be a student who attended the previous semester and elected to enroll in the current or subsequent semester. A transfer student is as the name implies, a student who attended another institution prior to attending MCC. The last group, the "stop-outs" are the most elusive attendance group at any college. Stop-outs are students that have attended MCC and have exited the institution and did not return for the subsequent semester. In fact, many stop-outs do not return for several semesters or years; but fortunately, there are enough MCC stop-outs returning to make significant contributions to each semester’s enrollment. As an example, during fall 2001 the MCC student enrollment could be divided into three very basic groups: first-time students, all other students and graduates. Figure 4 shows the disposition of the fall 2001 semester by student enrollment groups.

![Figure 4. Disposition of Fall 2001 Enrollment](image)

N = 17,375

Source: Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment.

The total Fall 2001 enrollment highlights the contribution of the three enrollment groups. As can be seen from the graph, first-time students represent 29 percent (5,056 students) of the Fall 2001 enrollment, all other students represent 68 percent (11,818 students), and graduates (501 students) are 3 percent of the total. However, when one takes into account the non-returning students from fall to the spring semester (6,000 to 7,000 students) MCC must look to other student sources to populate our courses. The loss of the graduates and the number of students who choose not to enroll for the spring semester present a challenge to colleges to meet the "gap" realized by student stop-outs.
Figure 5 illustrates how Spring 2002 enrollment would look as a result of Fall 2001. Notice that of the state-aid headcount enrollment that was reported for Spring 2002 (17,049), returning and entering first-time students will only represent 13,648 students or 80 percent of the number of students needed to meet spring enrollment expectations. The remaining number of students (3,401) needed to meet spring enrollment expectations will be a combination of stop-outs and reverse transfers. Bridging the gap to meet enrollment expectations is a bigger challenge than may be perceived. Our analysis shows that the number of non-returning students from fall-to-spring can vary from 6,000 to 7,000 students. To meet Spring 2002 enrollment expectations, first-time students will make up 50 percent of the gap with the remaining 50 percent coming from stop-outs and reverse transfers. It is not surprising that at the current rate of retention for spring-to-fall and fall-to-fall, the number of non-returners will increase accordingly; 8,000 to 9,000 for spring-to-fall and 9,000 to 10,000 for fall-to-fall. As has been stated previously, to make up the headcount difference between continuing and first-time students, it is necessary to focus on those student enrollment groups that historically are the most unpredictable: stop-outs and reverse transfers. The challenge to maintain student enrollment is significant and it is our hope that this report provides some insight into MCC retention patterns.