



SREB

Research Brief

New Measures, New Perspectives: Graduates' Time- and Credits-to-Degree in SREB States

State policy-makers and education leaders in SREB states know that increasing the proportion of residents with postsecondary credentials is critical but difficult in a time of weak economies and tight budgets. Higher education leaders, in particular, are being called on to make colleges and universities more productive and efficient. These leaders want to reduce the *length of time* it takes students to complete a degree and the *number of credits* students accumulate that are not required to complete a degree. If they succeed, leaders may save students and taxpayers money and help students launch their careers with less debt. Success also will help move students through college faster, making room for the growing number who need postsecondary education.

Yet for decades, leaders have lacked the data they need to assess students' time- and credits-to-degree fully. (*Time-to-degree* is a student's length of time from entering college to receiving a degree. *Credits-to-degree* is the number of credits that a student attempts toward a degree.) Through the leadership of the SREB-State Data Exchange, that has begun to change.

New measures on college completion have been designed

The SREB-State Data Exchange has designed new measures on college completion in recent years — and collected and reported data based on these measures. This report introduces the latest new measures, distinguishes them from graduation rate measures, and reports the first results on time-to-degree and credits-to-degree. It also provides information on the characteristics of graduates, focusing primarily on their beginning status at the institutions from which they graduated.

The SREB-State Data Exchange's leadership in this work began in the late 1990s, when its 24 partners (agencies representing the 16 SREB states' public higher education institutions) began to address measures related to college completion. The Data Exchange was among the earliest to create measures to track first-to-second-year student persistence, graduation rates and progress toward degree. The Data Exchange has been able to report progression and graduation rates since 1998 and first-to-second-year student persistence since 2003.

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In 2010, the Data Exchange partners introduced further new measures for time- and credits-attempted-to-degree. **These are the first measures of this kind used to collect data among multiple states from statewide data collections**, and not from sample-based surveys. As a result of these latest additions, the annual Data Exchange now provides new information on bachelor's graduates from *public four-year* colleges and universities and associate's degree graduates from *public two-year* colleges in many states in the SREB region. The results make available for the first time:

- state-by-state, college-by-college breakdowns on the characteristics of graduates who began at and graduated from the same colleges, and on those who were transfer students.
- the numbers and percentages of graduates who began at the same colleges that awarded their degrees — who also had taken college-level course work while in high school.
- the number and proportions of college graduates who began as full- or part-time students.
- time-to-degree and credits-to-degree for these different categories of graduates.

With these data, researchers and state leaders can gain valuable new perspectives on who finished degrees, how long it took them, and how many credits they attempted along the way — key information that is not shown by traditional progression and graduation rates. (See Box A.)

As these new measures are augmented and enhanced in the future, state and education leaders will be able to make better-informed policy decisions at the state and institutional levels that can streamline the degree-completion process.

Box A

Characteristics of Traditional, Cohort-Based Graduation Rates as Distinct from Measures of Time- and Credits-to-Degree

- ◆ Traditional calculations of college graduation rates measure the percentage of a cohort (or group) of students who enter college each fall and go on to complete degree programs within 150 percent of “normal” time (i.e., typically, six years for four-year programs and three years for two-year programs). Each year's cohort includes only first-time, full-time students.
- ◆ SREB adds to the degree-completers those cohort students who are still enrolled at 150 percent of normal time and those who are still studying but transferred to other institutions. By combining completers and students “in progress” to a degree, SREB creates a progression rate.

However, neither rate counts in the cohort part-time students, students who are not seeking formal degrees, or students transferring from other institutions.

- ◆ SREB's time- and credits-to-degree measures now give a fuller view of graduates and tell their story from the time they entered the institutions that awarded their degrees.

How the new measures were developed

Ideally, measures of time- and credits-to-degree would provide complete information on how long it takes all students to complete degrees — and how many credits they take from their first matriculation into college until graduation. This would mean accounting for all of the students’ time spent in pursuit of a degree and *all* of the credits earned toward their degrees at *all* institutions they had attended. Such studies would require that all of the course data in students’ college histories be accumulated in one place. Tracking students in such an ideal manner currently is not possible, except in one-time research studies.

Recognizing that the need to raise degree-completion rates warrants the pursuit of less-than-perfect, but still helpful, measures, the Data Exchange partners pilot-tested several possibilities and arrived at calculations for time- and credits-to-degree, based on the following key elements:

- All bachelor’s degree graduates from public four-year institutions and all associate’s degree graduates from public two-year colleges — for the given year — are included in a calculation.
- All calculations are made in relationship to time and credits *at the institution from which the student graduated*. States measure time from the point when the graduate entered the institution awarding the degree. They measure credits attempted at the institution that awarded the degree.
- Graduates are classified by status at *the time they entered the institution*, either as a *first-time-in-college* (FTIC) or transfer student. They also are classified as full- or part-time students based on the first term of attendance. (If a student changed later, the classification is not changed.)

Table 1

Participants in the SREB-State Data Exchange 2009-10 Study of 2008-09 Graduates				
	Time-to-Degree		Credits-Attempted-to-Degree	
	Public Two-Year	Public Four-Year	Public Two-Year	Public Four-Year
Arkansas	X	X	X	X
Florida	X	X	X	
Georgia	X	X	X	X
Kentucky	X	X	X	X
Mississippi		X		
North Carolina	X	X	X	X
Tennessee	X	X		
Texas	X	X		
Virginia	X	X	X	X
West Virginia	X	X		
Total Data Representing	Nine States 252 Colleges	10 States 238 Universities	Six States 160 Colleges	Five States 65 Universities

Source: SREB-State Data Exchange, 2009-10.

- Graduates who were FTIC students are classified further as either those who had a record of college credits attempted

The Data Exchange measures on time and credits are determined by examining official enrollment-date files, not course-completion data. Thus, the credits measured are credits *attempted* rather than credits *earned* or *accepted* at the institution awarding the degree. (For specific definitions and guidelines, see “Education Data” under the “SREB Programs” menu at www.sreb.org.)

Initial-year participants — and findings

The Data Exchange incorporated the new measures in its 2009-10 study of 2008-09 graduates. Although all of the Data Exchange partners are working to provide the graduates’ characteristics and time-to-degree data, Table 1 shows the SREB states that participated in the initial year.

Nearly half of graduates were transfer students at the colleges awarding their degrees

The data showed that *nearly half* — 45 percent — of 2008-09 bachelor’s graduates were transfer students at the public four-year colleges or universities from which they graduated. Slightly more than half — 52 percent — began at the same institutions from which they graduated (i.e., were FTIC students). Eight percent of these graduates took college-level courses while in high school. Forty-four percent did not. FTIC graduates in individual states ranged from 27 percent in Texas to 68 percent in Virginia. The percentage of graduates who were transfer students at the colleges where they graduated ranged from 29 percent in West Virginia to 56 percent in Texas. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

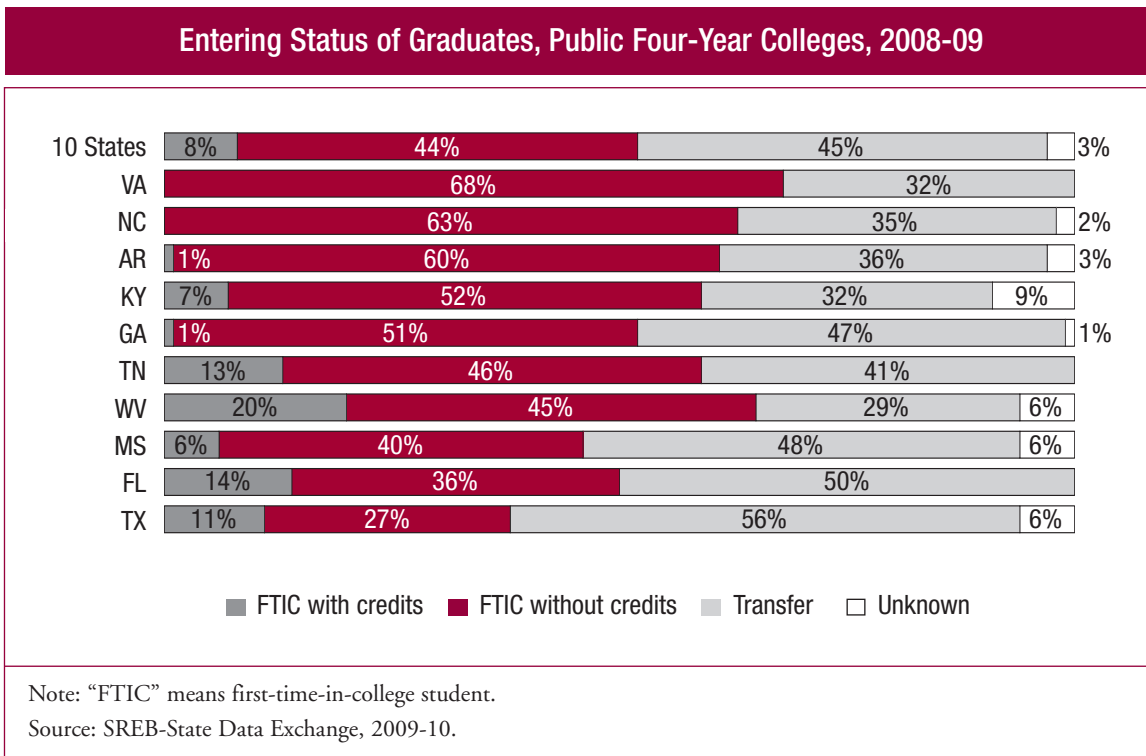
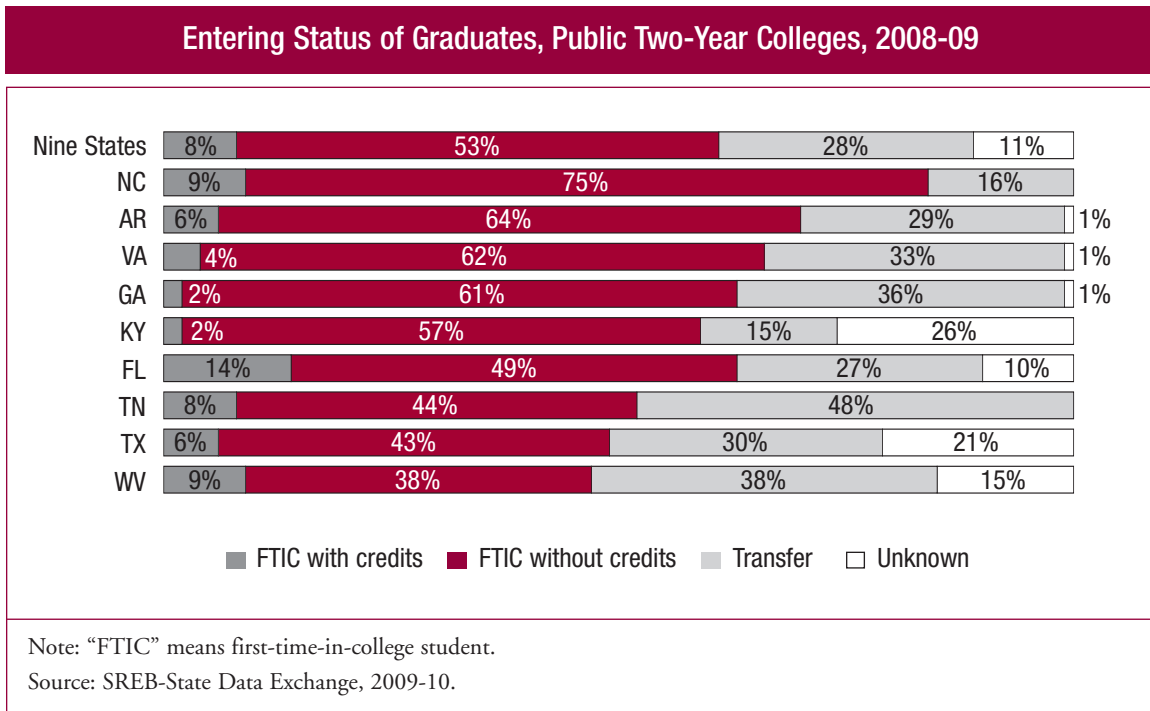


Figure 2



At public two-year colleges, 61 percent of the students receiving associate’s degrees in 2008-09 were FTIC students, and 28 percent were transfer students at the colleges awarding their degrees. About 8 percent had a record of college-level courses in high school. The percentage of first-time students who entered two-year colleges with a record of taking college-level courses while in high school ranged from 2 percent in Georgia and Kentucky to 14 percent in Florida. The percentage of graduates of two-year colleges who were transfer students ranged from 15 percent in Kentucky to 38 percent in West Virginia. (See Figure 2.)

The high percentage of transfer students among the graduates in both two- and four-year colleges — 28 percent and 45 percent, respectively — is significant. States and institutions need to ensure that policies and practices are in place to facilitate the smooth transition of students from one institution to another. States need to examine their transfer-of-credit policies to see that they provide the right level of guarantees to students about what will transfer, offer transfer information websites to ensure the policies are well communicated, and create transfer advisor networks to ensure each campus provides trained advisors to help students intending to transfer and those who have just transferred into an institution.

The relatively low percentage of graduates who attempted college-level courses while in high school — 8 percent at both two-year colleges and four-year colleges — indicates that more can be done to promote dual enrollment and early-college options for high school students. The percentages do not capture credits awarded from courses in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs. States that promote these programs prominently may have a significant proportion of graduates with credits from these programs.

Full-time attendance stimulates degree completion

In both public two- and four-year colleges, *high percentages of graduates were full-time students* when they started at the colleges from which they graduated, according to the Data Exchange information. At four-year colleges, nearly eight out of 10 graduates began as full-time students at the institutions from which they graduated. At two-year colleges, nearly half were full-time students and 40 percent were part time. (See Figure 3.)

While many students in both two- and four-year colleges attend part time for various periods, those who graduate tend to be those who began with a full-time commitment. States and institutions need to do what they can to help more students pursue full-time study. Financial aid policies that promote a full-time commitment clearly encourage students to focus on completing certificates and degrees.

Graduates classified as FTIC who had no college credits attempted while in high school took five years to complete a bachelor's degree

SREB states participating in the Data Exchange looked at how long it took 2008-09 graduates who were first-time-in-college at the colleges from which they graduated and who had attempted no credits while in high school to complete a bachelor's degree. They found these graduates spent an average of five years completing their studies. Transfer students spent an average of 3.6 years. (See Figure 4.)

- Graduates who were FTIC students *with no record of attempting college credits* in high school averaged five years, while those *with a record of taking college credits* spent an average of 4.6 years earning their degrees.

Figure 3

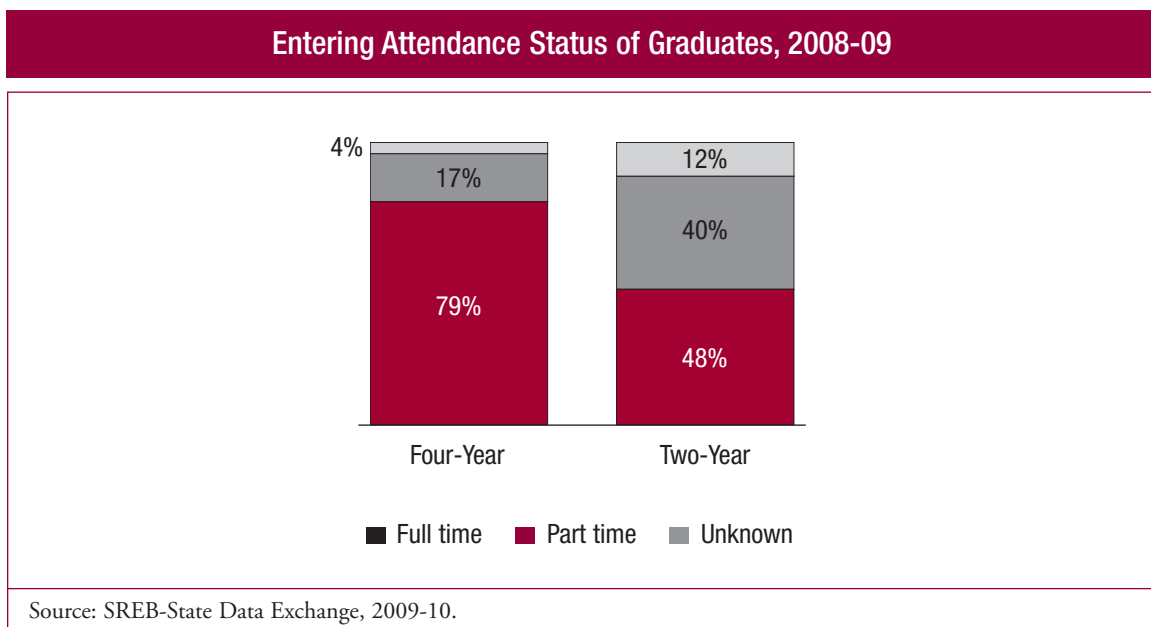
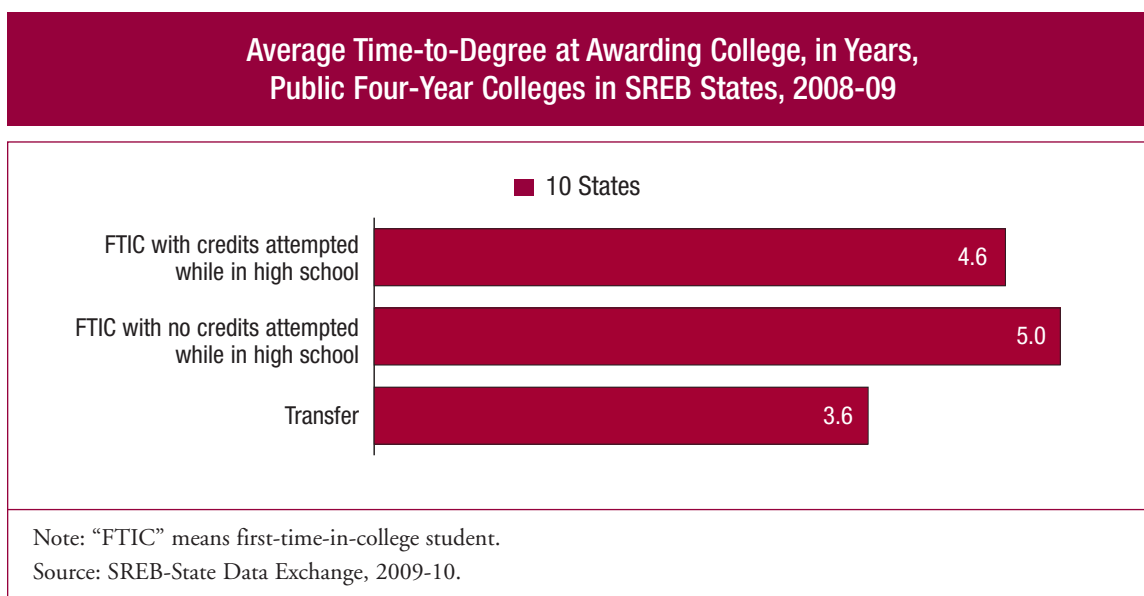


Figure 4



- For FTIC students *with no record of attempting college credits in high school*, the average time-to-degree ranged from 4.5 years in Tennessee to 5.4 years in Georgia. For transfer students, the average time ranged from three years in Arkansas to four years in West Virginia.
- Graduates who were transfer students averaged 3.6 years at the colleges awarding their degrees. (See Appendix A for state-specific information.)

These averages will surprise some leaders who believe the average time-to-degree for bachelor’s degree graduates is closer to six years. But they likely have confused this timeline with the standard calculation for graduation rates at four-year colleges, which measures the percentage of entering freshmen who graduate in six years, or 150 percent of the normal time for completing that degree.

Several factors may account for the shortened time-to-degree for students who attempted college credits while in high school compared with students who did not. Students who take college-level courses in high school may be better prepared for the rigors of college work — and thus better able to adjust to college study. But their shortened time in college may not mean they take fewer courses in college.

Transfer students at public four-year colleges graduated on average a full year earlier than first-time *students who completed college-level courses* in high school. This might mean that these students transfer soon after beginning college — after the freshman year. But the study does *not* reveal how long transfer students spent at previous institutions. Often, transfer students lose credits in the transition from college to college. Also, 30 percent of the four-year college graduates who arrived at their degree-granting institution as transfer students *began as part-time students*, compared with only 7 percent for their FTIC counterparts. It necessarily takes part-time students longer to complete than full-time students.

Associate's graduates take more than four years because many go to school part time

The 2008-09 graduates of two-year colleges who were first-time-in-college at the colleges from which they graduated and had not attempted college credits in high school spent significantly longer earning associate's degrees than those who did attempt college credits in high school — 4.6 years compared with 2.9 years. (See Figure 5.)

- Graduates who were FTIC students *with a record of attempting college credits* in high school spent an average of 2.9 years in college; those with no record of taking college courses in high school averaged 4.6 years.
- For FTIC students *with no record of attempting college credits* while in high school, the average time to an associate's degree in individual states ranged from 3.1 years in Tennessee to 6.7 years in Arkansas. For transfer students, the average time ranged from 2.5 years in Tennessee to 4.6 years in Arkansas. (See Appendix B for state-specific information.)
- Graduates who were transfer students averaged 3.4 years.

At two-year colleges, *transfer students* took longer to graduate than FTIC *students who attempted some college credits while in high school*. Transfer students at two-year colleges took almost as long to complete two-year degrees (3.4 years) as transfer students at four-year colleges took to complete four-year degrees (3.6 years). But most transfer-student graduates (57 percent) at public two-year colleges enrolled part time.

FTIC bachelor's graduates attempt more hours than a typical degree requires

Students going to college full time can complete 120 hours in two regular terms per year for four years. (A bachelor's degree is typically designed to be completed in eight semesters, averaging 15 hours of credit per semester or 120 semester credit-hours total.)

Figure 5

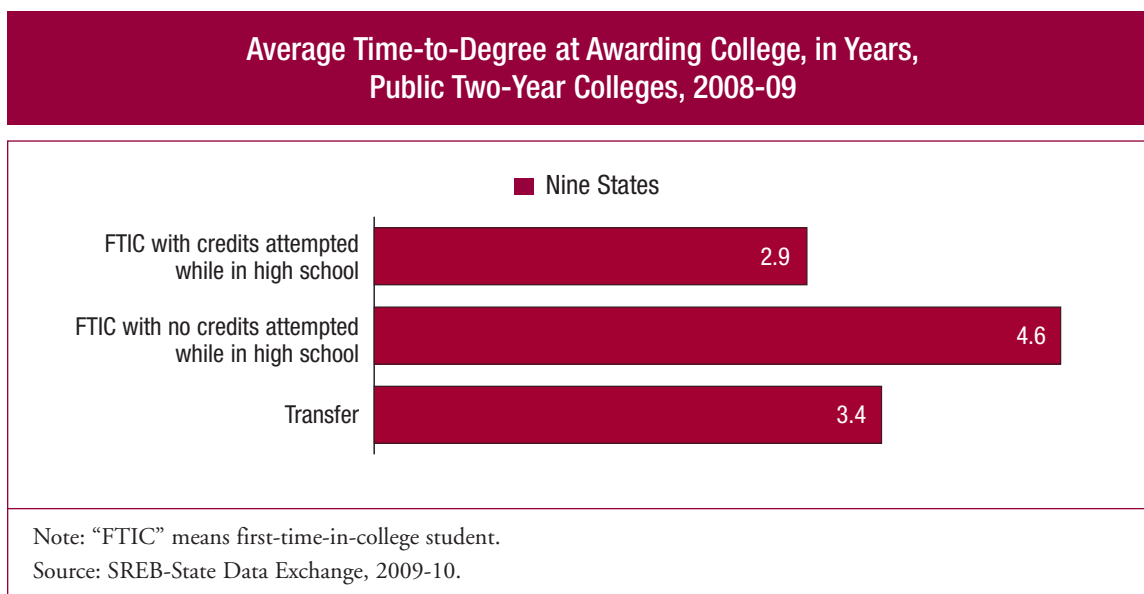
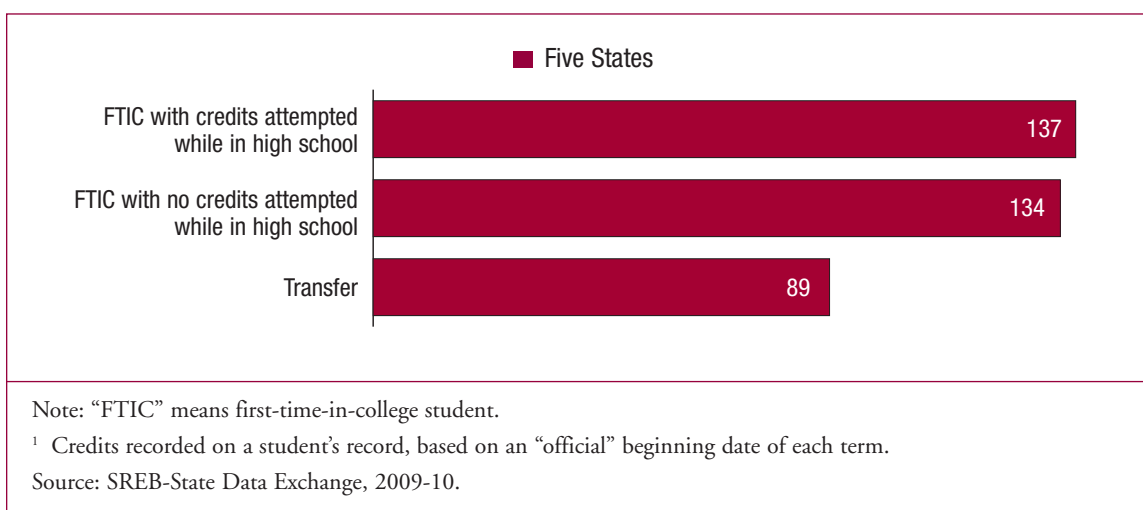


Figure 6

Average Credits Attempted¹ for a Bachelor's Degree at Awarding College,
Public Four-Year Colleges, 2008-09



The 2008-09 graduates who were FTIC students and who had a record of attempting college credits in high school averaged 137 attempted credits while earning their degrees. Graduates who were FTIC students with no record of taking college courses in high school averaged 134 credits attempted in earning their degrees. Graduates who were transfer students averaged 89 attempted credits. (See Figure 6.)

What accounts for this counterintuitive finding — that FTIC students who attempted college-level credits in high school actually take *more* hours on average to finish college than students who do not take college-level courses? First, the difference in the additional credits is relatively small: It is only three credit hours, or the equivalent of one typical semester course. Second, the students taking more hours in college are the same ones that may be high achievers since they had a track record of extra advanced courses while in high school.

A more important question is why *both* groups attempted, on average, the equivalent of an extra semester — 14 to 17 credit-hours — to complete a bachelor's degree. *State policy-makers and education leaders who seek to improve efficiency in higher education need to research the reasons for these "extra" credits and, where appropriate, help students trim extra credits from their college careers.* This could allow more students to finish college faster, and it could save states and students money.

State variations stand out. For FTIC students with no record of attempting college credits while in high school, the average credits-to-degree at the awarding college ranged from 121 in Arkansas to 145 in North Carolina. For transfer students, the average credits attempted ranged from 78 credits in Virginia to 97 in Kentucky. (See Appendix C for state-specific information.)

FTIC associate's degree graduates, on average, take about one semester's equivalent of classes more than typically is required for full-time students

The typical associate's degree requires from 60 to 65 hours of semester credits. An average load is 15 credit-hours per semester. Graduates of public two-year colleges who began at the colleges from which they graduated as FTIC students earned about the equivalent of an extra semester of credit whether or not they attempted credits in high school. (See Figure 7.)

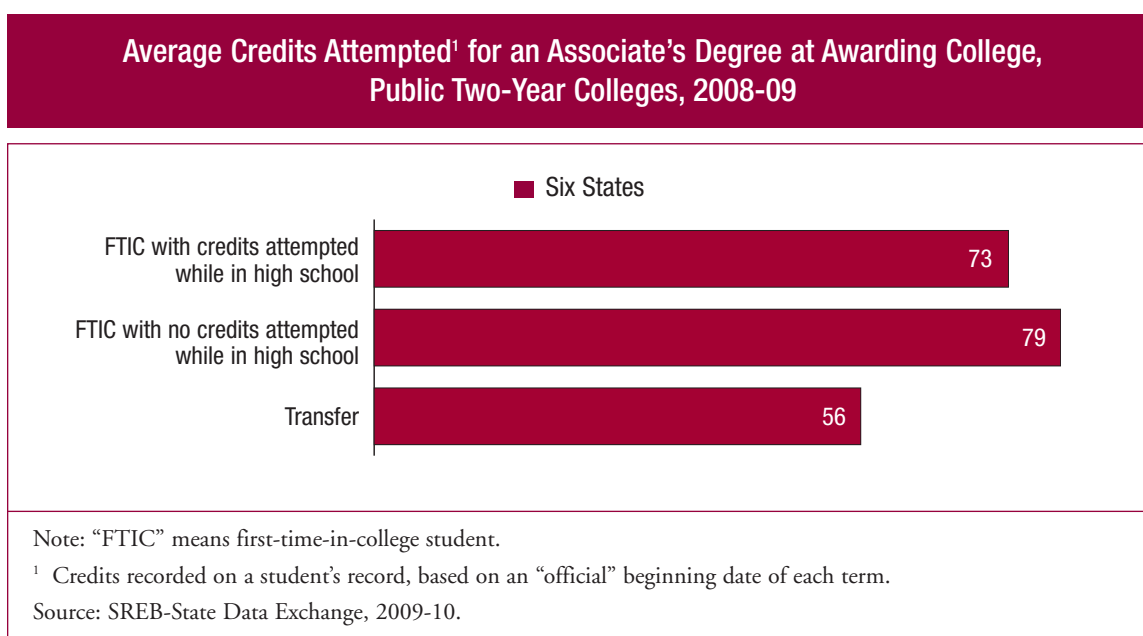
- Graduates who were FTIC students *with a record of attempting college credits* while in high school attempted, on average, 73 credits.
- Graduates who were FTIC students *with no record* of taking college courses in high school attempted, on average 79 credits.
- Graduates who were *transfer* students attempted, on average, 56 credits.

This overall trend in average credits-to-degree for FTIC students at two-year colleges does not match the pattern at four-year institutions. The two-year college graduates who were FTIC students *with attempted college credits* from high school completed associate's degrees with six fewer credits than their counterparts who entered *without* attempted college credits. Six credits are equivalent to two typical semester courses.

For FTIC students *with no record of attempting college credits* in high school, the average credits-to-degree at two-year colleges ranged from 74 in Arkansas to 87 in Kentucky. For transfer students, they ranged from 49 credits in Florida to 65 in Kentucky. (See Appendix D for state-specific information.)

FTIC graduates of two-year colleges who began *with a record of attempting college-level credits* in high school graduated with fewer attempted hours in college than students *without* a record of attempting college-level courses in high school.

Figure 7



Summary

- The new SREB-State Data Exchange measures of time-to-degree and credits-attempted-to-degree can help policy-makers and education leaders answer these questions: **How long does it take graduates to finish college? How many credits do graduates attempt on the way to degrees?**

Based on initial results from many SREB states, graduates at public four-year colleges who start as full-time students at the colleges where they graduate take from 4.6 to five years to complete bachelor's degrees. Graduates at public two-year colleges starting as full-time students take from 2.9 to 4.6 years to earn associate's degrees.

Some policy-makers have the impression that students who earn a bachelor's degree typically take six years to graduate. SREB's new data refute this perception. It is likely founded in the most common graduation rate, known as the "six-year graduation rate," which is defined as the percentage of entering students who complete a bachelor's degree within 150 percent of normal time. ("Normal" is defined as four years.) While the rate captures the percentage of students who finish six years after they enter, it does not intend to mean that most students take that long to finish. Indeed, the Data Exchange study now shows that graduates who stay at the same college average less than five years to finish.

While SREB's new measures may not be the ideal measures for time- and credits-to-degree, they do reveal how long it takes students who follow traditional college paths to complete degrees.

- The new measures also help answer this question: **"Does taking college-level courses in high school reduce college graduates' time- and credits-to-degree?"**

The initial results show that high school students taking courses for college-level credit generally complete college in less time than students who do not. But that *may* not necessarily lead to fewer college credits while in college. The average of three credits more in the initial results is too small a difference to make a definitive conclusion possible at this time.

Policy-makers have assumed that high school students who earn college credit while in high school will graduate from college in less time *and* with fewer credits. After all, they are able to get a jump-start on college. The evidence, however, is mixed. These graduates completed their bachelor's degrees with three more credit-hours than their peers who did not attempt college-level credit. Some have speculated that these students have taken extra courses in college beyond the requirements so they could more fully pursue academic interests.

Graduates of two-year colleges who entered college as FTIC students with college-level credits attempted in high school also were able to graduate in less time. On average, they completed their degrees with fewer credits than their peers who had not attempted college-level credits in high school.

- The new measures also help confirm the importance of full-time attendance to degree completion.

- Lastly, **the data for the new measures offer insights into the proportion of graduates who began at the colleges from which they graduated and those who went there as transfer students.** Slightly more than half of bachelor's graduates (52 percent) received their degrees at the colleges where they started. About 45 percent of bachelor's graduates were transfer students at the colleges from which they graduated.

While a higher proportion of the 2008-09 graduates finished where they initially began college, the percentage who transferred is significant. A question for policy-makers is whether institutions are sufficiently ensuring that transfer students are well-served — and supported — because they are a growing source of college graduates in the region.

Conclusion

The new measures about the characteristics of graduates, time-to-degree and attempted-credits-to-degree yield important initial findings from 10 SREB states. They reveal that high percentages of graduates are transfer students, but even higher percentages begin at the institutions that award their degrees. They show that the time-to-degree for students who begin college at the institutions that award their degrees is shorter than many thought it would be. They confirm that the average attempted-credits-to-degree exceed normal degree requirements — by as much as an entire full-time academic semester.

The SREB-Data Exchange partners will continue to work to bring helpful measures to policy-makers and education leaders that can lead to better decisions to guide the improvement of degree-completion rates.

With these data, policy-makers and education leaders are in a stronger position to consider policy options for reducing time- and credits-to-degree, thereby saving both the state and the students considerable money.

Appendix A

Average Time-to-Degree at Awarding College, in Years, for 2008-09 Bachelor's Graduates at Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities

	First-Time in College With College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	First-Time in College Without College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	Transfer
Arkansas	5.2	5.3	3.0
Florida	4.8	5.1	3.7
Georgia	5.0	5.4	3.9
Kentucky	4.7	5.3	3.9
Mississippi	4.8	5.2	3.7
North Carolina	5.0	4.9	3.9
Tennessee	4.4	4.5	3.6
Texas	4.5	5.1	3.6
Virginia	4.3	4.6	3.5
West Virginia	4.6	5.3	4.0

Source: SREB-State Data Exchange, 2009-10.

Appendix B

Average Time-to-Degree at Awarding College, in Years, for 2008-09 Associate's Graduates at Public Two-Year Colleges

	First-Time in College With College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	First-Time in College Without College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	Transfer
Arkansas	5.8	6.7	4.6
Florida	2.7	4.3	3.2
Georgia	3.6	4.8	3.7
Kentucky	3.5	4.7	3.7
North Carolina	2.7	4.2	2.8
Tennessee	3.1	3.1	2.5
Texas	3.2	4.7	3.6
Virginia	2.3	5.0	3.4
West Virginia	3.5	4.3	4.1

Source: SREB-State Data Exchange, 2009-10.

Appendix C

Average Credits-to-Degree at Awarding College for 2008-09 Bachelor's Graduates at Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities

	First-Time in College With College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	First-Time in College With No College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	Transfer
Arkansas	125	121	83
Georgia	133	138	92
Kentucky	139	144	97
North Carolina	159	145	92
Virginia	126	123	78

Note: Fewer Data Exchange partners reported these data than time-to-degree because participation in this section was considered voluntary as this new measure was introduced.

Source: SREB-State Data Exchange, 2009-10.

Appendix D

Average Credits-to-Degree at Awarding College for 2008-09 Associate's Graduates at Public Two-Year Colleges

	First-Time in College With College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	First-Time in College Without College-Level Credits Attempted While in High School	Transfer
Arkansas	72	74	59
Florida	73	77	49
Georgia	78	83	61
Kentucky	75	87	65
North Carolina	73	81	62
Virginia	71	75	61

Note: Fewer Data Exchange partners reported these data than time-to-degree because participation in this section was considered voluntary as this new measure was introduced.

Source: SREB-State Data Exchange, 2009-10.

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