

Academic and Employment Profiles of Adults with Some College but No Degree Intervention Strategies to Target Re-Enrollment Efforts for this Population

Motivation

The demand for workers with postsecondary credentials far exceeds the current supply. In 2020, 65% of American jobs will require some form of postsecondary education; however, the current attainment level is 48% (Lumina Foundation, 2019). This gap cannot be closed solely by increasing college enrollment and completion among traditionally-aged students. As such, there has been a strong policy shift in recent years toward increasing credential attainment among adult workers, particularly those who have completed some college credits but withdrew prior to completing a degree. Nationwide, there are 36 million “SCND” (some college, no degree) adults (Shapiro et al, 2019).

Despite the importance and size of this population, there is a dearth of detailed analysis describing SCND student academic experiences and employment outcomes. We believe the evidence we provide in this study can assist efforts to increase re-enrollment and completion among adults by: (1) informing the types of interventions and outreach to be directed at students; and (2) more efficiently targeting the students for whom the benefits of earning a credential is the highest.

Research design

The context of our study is the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), which consists of 23 community colleges in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and enrolls over 200,000 students per year. We define our SCND population as students who; experienced an enrollment “break” from VCCS for at least three years; earned at least 30 credits from a VCCS college; had a GPA of 2.0 or higher at the time they left VCCS; and last enrolled at VCCS prior to break between 2009-10 and 2013-14. For most of our analysis, we also limit our population of interest to students who did not enroll at any other college for at least three years after their break.

We use detailed administrative records from the VCCS, National Student Clearinghouse, and Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) to provide a descriptive profile of the SCND population, including their background characteristics, academic experiences, and employment outcomes trends both pre and post break. We then use regression analysis to estimate gaps (overall and program-specific) between SCND and similar Grads in post-VCCS employment outcomes.

Results

Re-enrollment behavior

Nearly half of all students who meet our sample criteria enroll at a non-VCCS institution within three years their break with VCCS. This statistic illustrates that a sizeable share of students leaving VCCS without a degree are continuing their education elsewhere; we consider these students lowest priority for targeting re-enrollment outreach. For this reason, we focus all remaining results on students who did not enroll anywhere within three years of leaving VCCS.¹

¹ Among these students, only 8% returned to VCCS within five years.

Background characteristics

The SCND population from the VCCS is fairly young, with the median age being 24 years old. The 25th and 75th percentiles are 21 years and 31 years old, respectively. Compared to graduates, SCND are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Academic experiences

On average, SCND students in our sample earn 48 credits from VCCS before their departure; the top quartile earned 57 credits or more (note that this is conditional on having earned at least 30 credits prior to departure). Some SCND students experienced a sharp decline in academic performance in the term prior to their break, even though many had been previously doing fairly well academically. On average, students end at VCCS with a GPA of 2.86, but earned only a 2.33 in their last term. Roughly 20% of students did not earn any credits during their last term. This pattern supports the need for efforts to identify at-risk students with substantial credit accumulation to support them while they are still enrolled, as well as to address the issues that may have attributed to these students' negative academic shocks once they re-enroll.

SCND/Grads gaps in employment outcomes

We find sizeable gaps between SCND and VCCS Grads on multiple labor market outcomes. In the fourth year following their break from VCCS, SCND students are three percentage points less likely to be employed at all; earn \$500 less per quarter; and are four percentage points less likely to earn above the 200% federal poverty level compared to otherwise similar Grads. When looking within program of study, we find large gaps for a handful programs, frequently in the health sciences field, such as Nursing and Radiography. However, due to small sample sizes within program of study, we are unable to precisely estimate the SCND/Grads program-specific gaps for the majority of programs. Out of the full sample of 26,512 SCND students, there are only 3,090 (12 percent) who left non-transfer-intending programs of study for which Grads earned, on average, significantly higher quarterly wages. Of these 3,090 students, over half (54%) were last enrolled in health science programs (e.g. Nursing, Physical Therapist Assistant, Dental Hygiene) which often have insufficient capacity to meet current demand.

Taken collectively, our results also indicate that, among the overall SCND population within states, the share that are not already returning to postsecondary education or who were pursuing fields with a large earnings premia associated with a degree may be substantially smaller than policy makers realize.

Implications for state policy and intervention

We believe these results have several implications for state policy and potential interventions to improve credentialing and employment outcomes for SCND students:

- Increase student success supports for SCND students when they first re-enroll in college.
- Target re-enrollment efforts on SCND students for whom the labor market benefit of returning to obtain a degree is most apparent.
- Target SCND students who have experienced flat or declining wages after leaving VCCS, and who may perceive greater value in obtaining additional training and a credential
- Target SCND students who performed well academically for most of their time at VCCS, but experience a negative academic shock immediately before they withdrew from VCCS.