

## Persistence and Transformation: The Other Factors in Reaching Graduation

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In the paper, "[Measuring Student Momentum, Credits Earned per Semester and more](#)," we show that students who graduate start earning college credits at a higher rate than students who drop out and that the graduating group maintain a higher GPA right from the first semester. Nevertheless, these are comparisons of averages. There are exceptions.

In this study we examined the outliers, those who graduated despite starting slowly, starting with a low GPA or earning credits very slowly or with many stop-out semesters.

During the academic year 2015-16, 2,799 students graduated with their only degree. (That is, we eliminated students who had earned more than one degree for this analysis.) While most of them "started fast and ran hard," not all did.

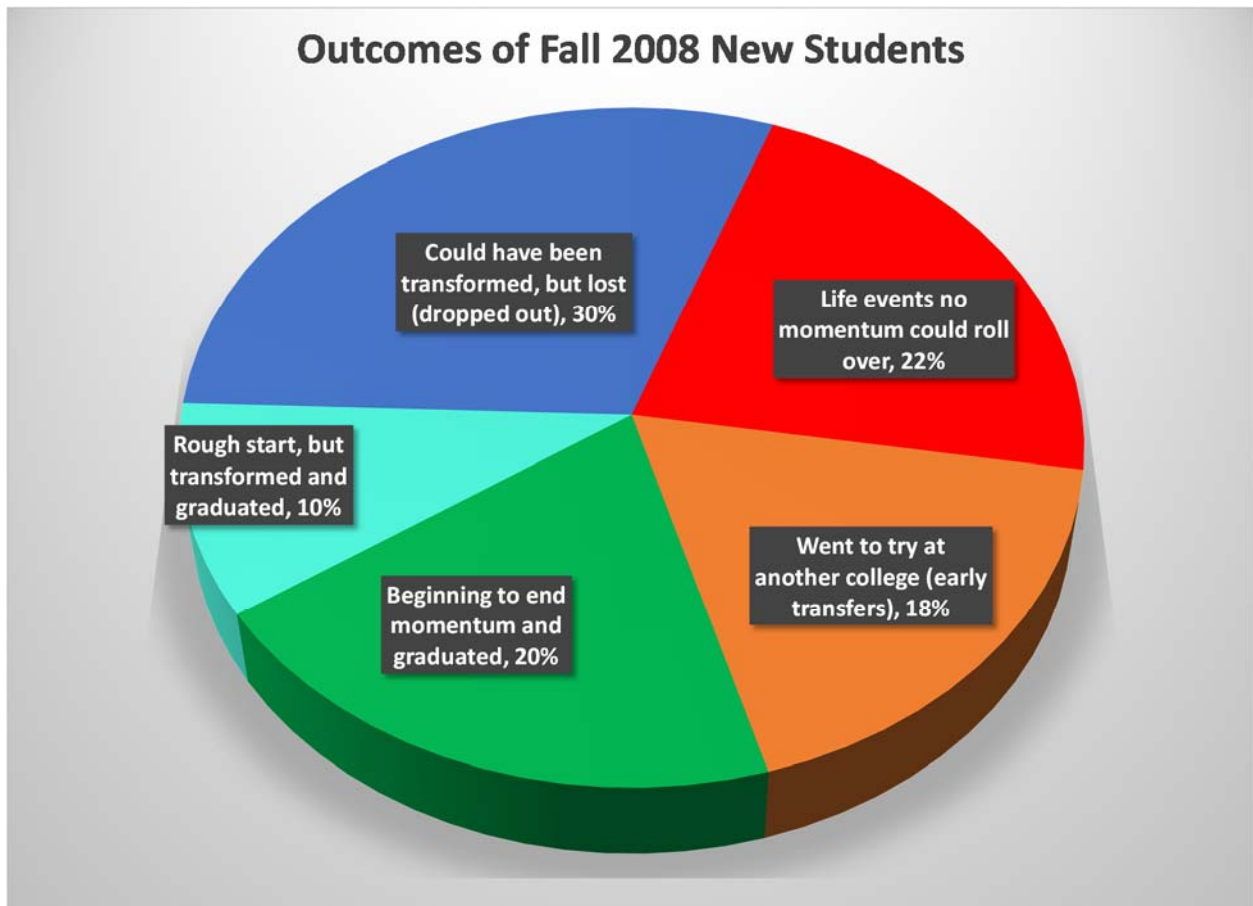
- 8.1% of these graduates attempted fewer than nine equated credits in their first degree semester.
- 17.4% attempted fewer than twelve equated credits in their first degree semester.
- 8.2% had a first semester GPA below 2.00 (excluding those with only developmental courses).
- 9.3% took more than six years to graduate.
- 30% of these graduates either started with fewer than 12 credits, had a first semester GPA (non-null) below 2.00, and/or took more than six years to graduate.

The figure 17.4%, those who began part-time, is hard to reconcile with the idea that the graduation rate of part-time, first-time students is about half that of those who begin full-time and that the proportion of new, part-time students is low. How did so many slow-starters make it to the finish line? First, new transfer students who begin part-time actually graduate at a higher rate than first-time, full-time students. Second, many new students begin in the spring when the proportion of transfer students is much higher. Third, given enough time (as happens when we look at a graduating class, rather than a starting cohort) the gap in graduation rate between those who start full-time and those who start part-time narrows slightly.

We appear to successfully transform nearly one-third of our graduates. They started slowly, poorly or proceeded very slowly. Something happened that turned them around. The College will need to do a lot of interviewing of these students to find out what really worked for them.

To give us an idea of how this translates into potential, we looked at all new students from Fall 2008, including those who began as first-time and as transfers and those who began full-time and part-time.

We know from previous research, [Background Radiation: Doing Well at LaGuardia and Dropping Out](#), that between 5% and 8% of students with good grades and high levels of credits earned drop out each semester. This accumulates to a loss of between 22% and 35% of the class. Let us assume that this indicates a level of life event that no student could survive and still remain in college. Also, 30% of the Fall 2008 graduated, while 18% transferred early. Of the 30% who graduated, using the results above, about one-third overcame difficulties and graduated.



**Figure 1**

If we use the low estimate of 5% inevitable loss each semester, then the 52% who dropped out could be divided between the 22% that we would have lost no matter what and the 30% that we might have saved. The remaining 30% of students could not be counted as having an overwhelming life event, did not transfer, and also did not transform and graduate. It looks like 40% had the potential to be transformed and we succeeded with about one-third of them.

This then is the critical community college question: How do we successfully transform more than one in three?