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The State Leadership Playbook for Planning and Implementing Community College Baccalaureate Degree Programs

BRIEF 3:

Completion Rates and the Time It Takes to Earn a Degree in Community College Bachelor's Programs:

Evidence and Recommendations

Elizabeth Meza & Davis Vo

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
bragg + associates
TROY STREET

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About This Brief

One of the intents of a community college bachelor's degree (CCB) program is to smooth the pathway to a bachelor's degree and into the workforce for community college students, reducing the time it takes these students to earn a degree and, as a result, lowering the overall cost. However, there is limited research on the extent to which these goals are achieved, and for whom.

Using a comprehensive dataset from Washington, this brief examines the completion rates, time to degree, and, by extension, affordability of CCB programs. Findings include:

- After two years, about half of CCB students graduate with a bachelor's degree (46%). The three-year completion rates jump by 14% percentage points to 60% and steadily grow to 64%, 67%, and 71% by four, five, and six years after entry, respectively.
- CCB students consistently had higher completion rates within two-, four-, and six years relative to community-college-to-traditional-university transfer students. This was true across nearly every gender, race/ethnicity, and age group examined.
- CCB students took, on average, a little over two years to complete their degrees.

With a shortened time to degree and a lower cost, CCB programs are well-positioned to expand access to and achievement of the bachelor's degree for traditionally underserved students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a standard, baseline, and defensible set of affordability metrics, including time to completion.**
2. **Build robust, longitudinal data systems or strong data collaborations to make the completion and affordability benefits of CCB degrees explicit.**
3. **Continue to design CCB programs that honor and embrace the complexity of students' lives.**
4. **Minimize administrative burdens at every stage of the student lifecycle.**

Introduction: Time to Completion and Affordability

The time it takes for students to complete a bachelor's degree — or time to degree — is a key dimension of college costs and affordability. The longer that students stay in college, the more they will accumulate academic, living, and opportunity costs. These costs include, but are not exclusive to, tuition and fees, loans, lost earnings from higher wage jobs, and delayed entry into the workforce.

Time to degree completion is a substantial issue for today's students: Despite often being dubbed as a "four-year" degree, the average bachelor's degree completion time is 5.1 years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2016). More striking, students who first earn an associate degree at a community college and then transfer to the traditional university sector, known as "vertical" transfer, take an average of 8.2 years to complete a bachelor's degree. Among students who started at a community college in fall 2019, only about 18% had earned a bachelor's within six years of entry (NSCRC, 2026).

Completion rates and time to degree are shaped by students' social contexts and backgrounds, such as gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic background, age, and enrollment intensity (i.e., whether they are enrolled part- or full-time) (NSCRC, 2025). And for community college students, it gets more complex: Community college students are more likely to balance other life commitments alongside college-going, such as employment or household duties (Matus-Grossman et al. 2002; Monaghan 2020).

5.1 years

the average "four-year" bachelor's degree completion time.
(National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016)

8.2 years

the average time students who first earn an associate degree at a community college and then transfer to the traditional university sector take to complete their degree.
(NSCRC, 2026)

22%
loss of credits

The average percentage of credits lost when a community college student transfers to a traditional public university.
(Government Accountability Office, 2017)

Time to degree is also impacted by factors such as credit loss from transfer pathways, the ability to enroll full-time consistently without delayed enrollment or "stopping out," and navigating varying transfer requirements from community colleges to the traditional university sector (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Schudde & Jabbar, 2024).

Credit loss and extended time to completion impose significant time and financial costs on transfer students (see Giani et al., 2026 for a recent review). Nationally, the Government Accountability Office (2017) found that students transferring from public community colleges to the traditional public university sector lost an estimated 22% of their credits, on average.

While the magnitude of this "transfer credit penalty" varies by state and by the strength of articulation policy, the average alone implores the need for a better path for community college students. CCB programs are designed with that intent — to smooth the pathway to a bachelor's degree and into the workforce for community college students, reducing the time it takes these students to earn a degree and, as a result, lowering the overall cost (Sotherland & Stange, 2026).

CCB programs are designed to smooth the pathway to a bachelor's degree and into the workforce for community college students, ***reducing the time it takes students to earn a degree and, as a result, lowering the overall cost.***

CCB Degrees: Potential for Shorter Timeframes, Increased Completion Rates, and Reduced Costs

CCB programs hold promise for reducing time to degree and thereby improving college costs and affordability. Perhaps the most obvious mechanism in which CCB programs improve college costs and affordability is because CCBs are a less expensive bachelor's degree pathway relative to the traditional university sector (Meza & Pawlicki, 2025; Meza, 2025). Analyzing data from 15 states where CCBs are offered, Meza (2026) found CCB tuition and fees average $5,417 annually, compared to $10,022 at public four-year institutions — a difference of nearly $4,600 per year. For the entire degree, this translates to a savings of nearly $20,000.

But college costs are much more than just tuition and fees. In states where data is available, **CCB students pay an average net price (total cost of attendance minus financial aid) of $8,195 per year, compared to $14,190 at public universities, representing a 42% reduction in actual costs.** Financial aid coverage patterns demonstrate that CCB programs effectively serve high-need populations, with aid covering 43% of total attendance costs compared to 30% at public universities (Meza, 2026).

$8,195

average CCB net price

compared to $14,190 at public universities, representing a 42% reduction in actual costs.
(Meza, 2026)

Students attending local CCB programs may also save money by not having to re-locate to obtain a bachelor's degree, and are less likely to have to navigate complex credit transfer processes.

Students attending local CCB programs may also save money by not having to re-locate to obtain a bachelor's degree (Bragg, 2026). Further, CCB students are less likely to have to navigate complex credit transfer processes, leading them to experience fewer administrative burdens (Vo, 2026). Put together, early evidence suggests that CCB students who continue their degree at the same institution may experience less credit loss en route to a bachelor's degree than community college students who transfer to the traditional university sector where credit loss, and associated monetary and time costs, is known to occur (Giani et al., 2026).

While research is limited, two studies indicate that CCB students complete degrees at rates comparable or faster than students who have transferred to a traditional university (i.e., "vertical" transfer). Hoang et al. (2022) studied CCB students in California and found, once admitted to a CCB program to begin upper-division coursework, 67% of students obtain a bachelor's degree in two years, and 78% completed in three years. Similarly, Meza & Bragg (2020) compared Washington CCB students to students who had successfully transferred in the same state and found that 68% of CCB students completed within three years of matriculating into a CCB program, while 70% of successful "vertical" transfer students completed in the same time frame.

Data & Methods

To examine the time to completion for CCB students, we ask:

- What are the two-, three-, four-, five-, and six-year completion rates for students after they matriculate into a CCB program?
    - How does this compare to students who "vertically" transfer?
- How does time to degree differ for students from various social contexts, backgrounds, and program areas?
- What are the recommendations and implications of these results on affordability for states and institutions?

This research draws on a longitudinal administrative dataset built and maintained by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). It includes students who entered a CCB program in Washington at any point between the 2018–19 and 2023–24 academic years, across 30 of the state's 34 community and technical colleges (hereafter community colleges). The analytic sample includes 16,746 records of students who matriculated into a CCB program within that time frame.

This is a descriptive analysis of completion rates and time to degree. For this research, we define and use the terms "completion" and "graduation" interchangeably; CCB completers and graduates are students who have a record of a completed CCB degree. We operationalize time to degree depending on whether CCB students completed their bachelor's degree within two, three, four, five, or six years after they officially matriculated into their CCB program and began upper-division coursework. Therefore, two-year completion rates represent the rate of students who completed a CCB degree within two years of entry/matriculation (i.e., after they began upper-division coursework and declared their intent to pursue a bachelor's degree in a CCB program). To further contextualize time to degree and completion rates, we also compare CCB outcomes relative to community college students who transferred to the traditional university sector. This is a descriptive analysis, so it is limited to the extent that any inferential or causal claims can be made.

Because the dataset extends through 2023-24, not all cohorts have completely "usable" data; for example, students who began in 2021-22 will have two-year completion rate data available but not six-year completion rates, since that event is not within the academic years of this dataset and has not taken place yet. As displayed on Table 1, two-year completion rates could be calculated for students who entered CCB programs from the 2018-19 to 2022-23 academic years. The three-year completion rates are calculated from four cohorts, the four-year completion rates from three cohorts, and so on.

We also explore the extent that completion rates at each time frame vary by gender, race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, whether students were enrolled part- or full-time during their first term of CCB matriculation, prior community college trajectories, field of study, IPEDS locale of institution, and Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) designation.

Table 1: Data Availability to Calculate Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Year of CCB Entry

	Data Available for Completion Rates Within...				
Year of CCB Entry	2 Years (n = 13,841)	3 Years (n = 11,057)	4 Years (n = 8,492)	5 Years (n = 5,430)	6 Years (n = 2,378)
2018-19	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2019-20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
2020-21	Yes	Yes	Yes		
2021-22	Yes	Yes			
2022-23	Yes				

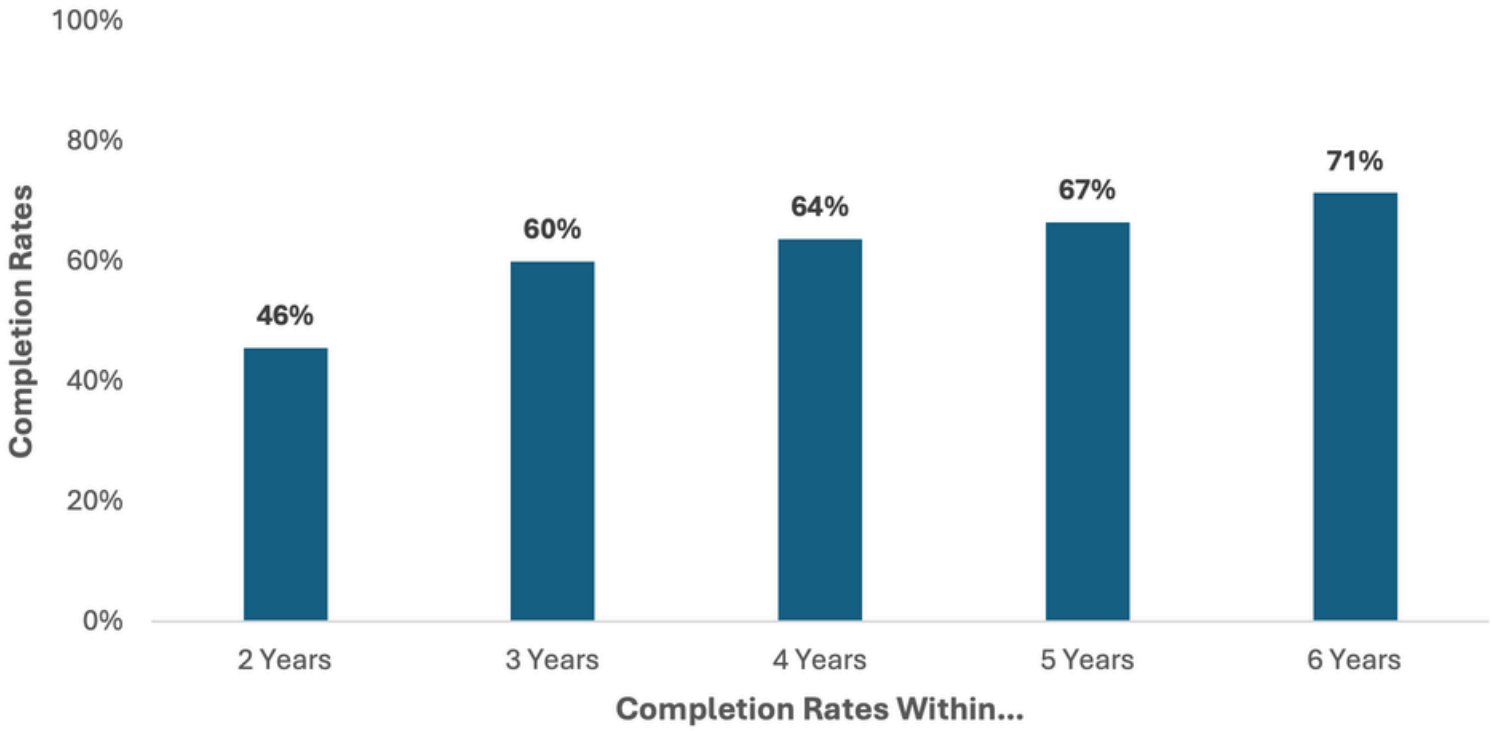
Findings

CCB Time to Degree and Completion Rates

After two years, about half of CCB students in the study graduated with a bachelor's degree (46%). The three-year completion rates jump by 14% percentage points to 60% and steadily grow to 64%, 67%, and 71% by four, five, and six years after entry, respectively (see Figure 1).

Looking only at CCB students for whom we have the full six years of data, **the average time to completion after matriculating into a CCB program was 2.1 years.**

Figure 1. Time to Degree and Completion Rates Among Community College Baccalaureate Students

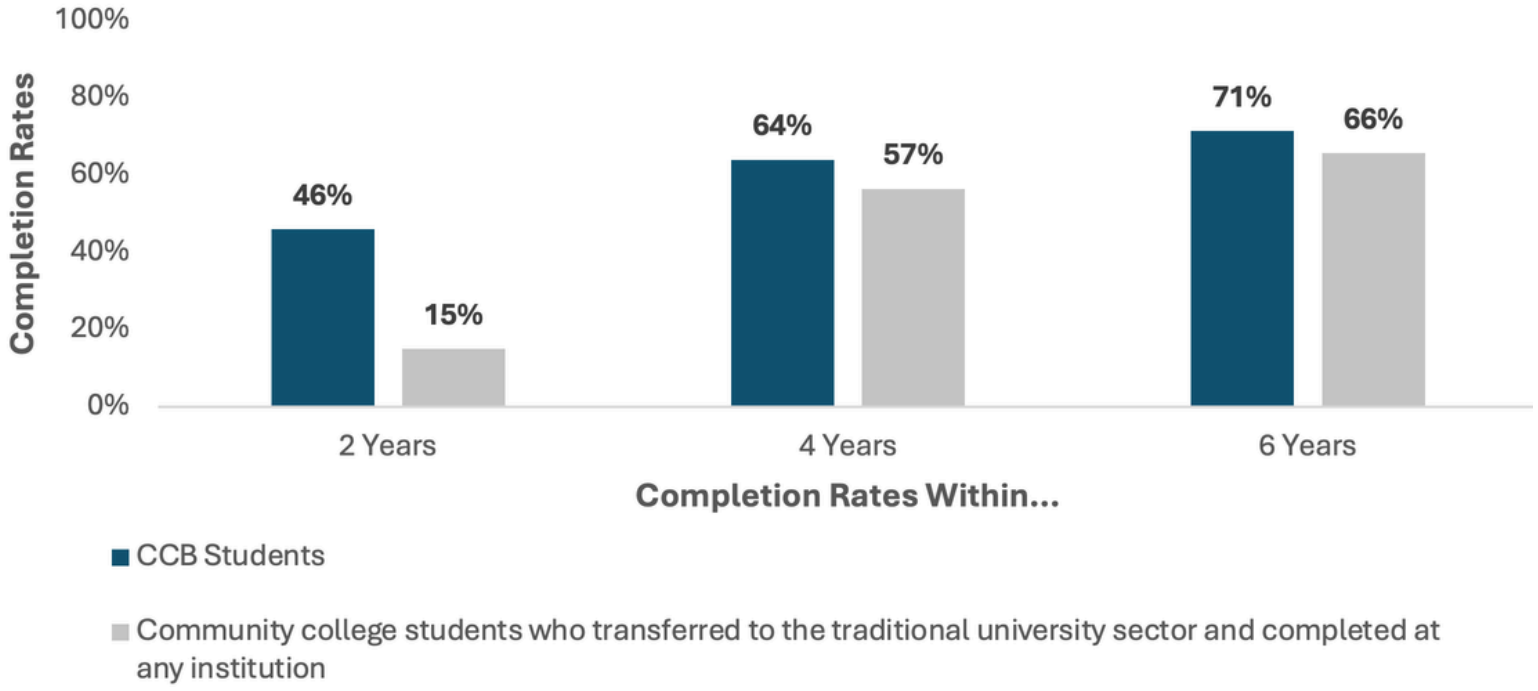


CCB vs. Community-College-to-Traditional-University-Transfers: Time to Completion Rates

We also compared CCB students' time to degree with students who transferred from a community college to a university (see Figure 2). **Among community-college-to-traditional-university transfer students, 15% completed their bachelor's degree within two years of transferring (NSCRC, 2026), compared to the 46% two-year completion rate of CCB students.** Among successful community-college-to-university transfer students, 66% completed their bachelor's degree within six years of transferring (NSCRC, 2026), compared to the 71% six-year completion rate of CCB graduates.

It should be emphasized that community-college-to-traditional-university transfer pathways and CCB pathways can be complementary, since different students can benefit from multiple bachelor's degree paths to achieve their goals. Evidence consistently suggests that CCB programs serve a unique student population that likely would not have had a feasible bachelor's degree pathway without a CCB option (Meza & Love, 2023; Meza & Vo, 2026; Vo, 2026; Vo et al., 2026). In the latest national inventory of CCB programs, we found that CCB graduates are more likely to be adult learners (defined as aged 25 years-old or older), Black, and Latiné, relative to all bachelor's degree graduates nationally (Meza & Vo, 2026).

Figure 2. Two-, Four-, and Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates, Community College Baccalaureate vs. Community-College-to-Traditional-University Transfer



CCB Time to Completion by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Age

Depending on students' gender, race/ethnicity, and age, two-year completion rates for CCB degrees ranged from 34% to 48%, three-year completion rates ranged from 48% to 64%, and six-year completion rates ranged from 53% to 74%.

Table 2. CCB Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Age Group

Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Age Group	Completion Rates Within...				
	2 Years (n = 13,841)	3 Years (n = 11,057)	4 Years (n = 8,492)	5 Years (n = 5,430)	6 Years (n = 2,378)
Overall Average	**46%**	**60%**	**64%**	**67%**	**71%**
Gender					
Female (n = 9,792)	47%	60%	64%	67%	74%
Male (n = 6,698)	44%	60%	64%	66%	68%
Gender: Not Listed (n = 256)	41%	60%	62%	55%	65%
Race/Ethnicity					
American Indian/Alaska Native (n = 136)	34%	48%	58%	63%	56%
Asian (n = 2,127)	47%	64%	68%	71%	71%
Black (n = 1,174)	40%	53%	57%	56%	63%
Latiné (n = 1,584)	42%	55%	59%	60%	73%
Multiracial (n = 2,579)	43%	56%	60%	64%	70%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (n = 96)	40%	54%	51%	52%	53%
White (n = 8158)	48%	62%	66%	68%	73%
Race/Ethnicity: Not Listed (n = 892)	45%	62%	66%	68%	74%
Age Group					
< 25 years-old (n = 5,843)	49%	62%	66%	67%	75%
25+ years-old (adult learner) (n = 10,902)	44%	59%	63%	66%	70%
25-29 years-old (n = 3,413)	46%	61%	65%	68%	73%
30-39 years-old (n = 4,460)	44%	59%	63%	66%	69%
40+ years-old (n = 3,029)	41%	56%	59%	63%	67%

When examining completion rates by gender, female and male CCB students have near identical completion rates within three, four, and five years. For example, the three-year completion rate is 60% for both female and male students, the four-year completion rate is 64% for both female and male students, and the five-year completion rates barely differ (67% for female and 66% male). Completion rates for students with unlisted genders — which includes non-binary and students whose gender are unknown — are consistently lower.

When examining completion rates by race and ethnicity, outcomes among Latiné and multiracial students are generally within five percentage points different than the overall rates, particularly by year six. For example, the six-year completion rate was 73% among Latiné CCB students, 70% among multiracial CCB students, and 73% among white CCB students, compared to the combined average of 71% across groups. Aligned with prior research on CCB programs statewide and nationally (Meza & Vo, 2026; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2025; Vo, 2026; Vo & Meza, 2026), **Latiné students experience favorable outcomes once they matriculate into CCB programs. The six-year completion rates for Latiné CCB students were higher (73%) than the overall average (71%).**

When examining completion rates and time to degree by age, students across the age spectrum experienced completion rates and time to degree within five percentage points of one another, revealing minimal variation among age groups. For example, the three-year completion rate among students 24 years old or younger was 62%, compared to 59% among adult learners. However, while the differences were not large, students aged 24 years old or younger consistently experienced higher completion rates relative to students who were 25 years old or older (adult learners).

Latiné students experience favorable outcomes once they matriculate into CCB programs. The six-year completion rates for Latiné CCB students were higher (73%) than the overall average (71%).

CCB vs. Community-College-to-Traditional-University-Transfers: Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

We also compared to the outcomes of community college students who transferred to the traditional university sector (see Figures 3 and 4 and Appendix: Table 5). This analysis included comparing the two-, four-, and six-year completion rates of the two bachelor's degree pathways across gender and race/ethnicity.

Overall, bachelor's degree completion rates were consistently higher among CCB students relative to community-college-to-traditional-university transfers. **CCB students consistently had higher completion rates within two, four, and six years relative to community-college-to-traditional-university transfers across nearly every gender, race/ethnicity, and age group examined.** Such outcomes align with prior preliminary analysis in California, which compared CCB students' completion rates relative to those of California community college students who transferred to regional state universities (Hoang et al., 2022).

For example, while Black CCB students have lower CCB completion rates within two years (40%) relative to the average overall CCB completion rates (46%), Black CCB students experienced considerably higher bachelor's degree completion rates relative to community-college-to-traditional-university transfer students (9%). In fact, the two-, four-, and six-year completion rates among Black CCB students (40%, 57%, and 63%, respectively) were consistently higher than completion rates among Black community-college-to-traditional-university transfer students (9%, 40%, and 49%, respectively).

CCB students consistently had higher completion rates within two, four, and six years relative to community-college-to-traditional-university transfers across nearly every gender, race/ethnicity, and age group examined.

Figure 3. Two-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates, CCB vs. Community-College-to-Traditional-University Transfer Students: Gender and Race/Ethnicity

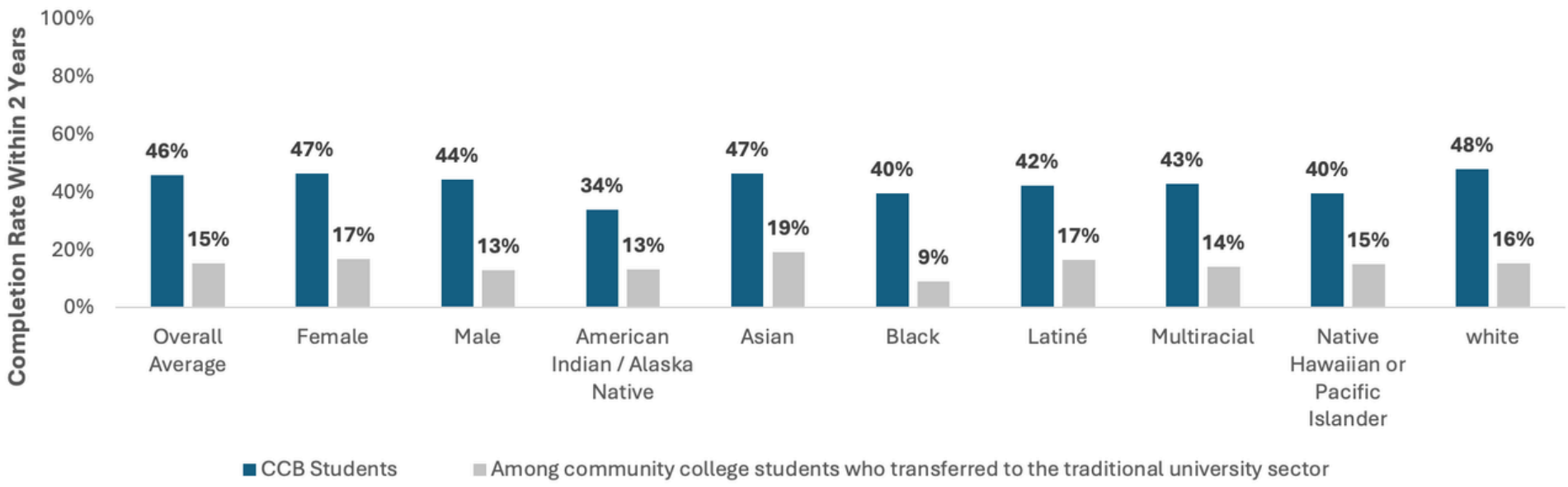
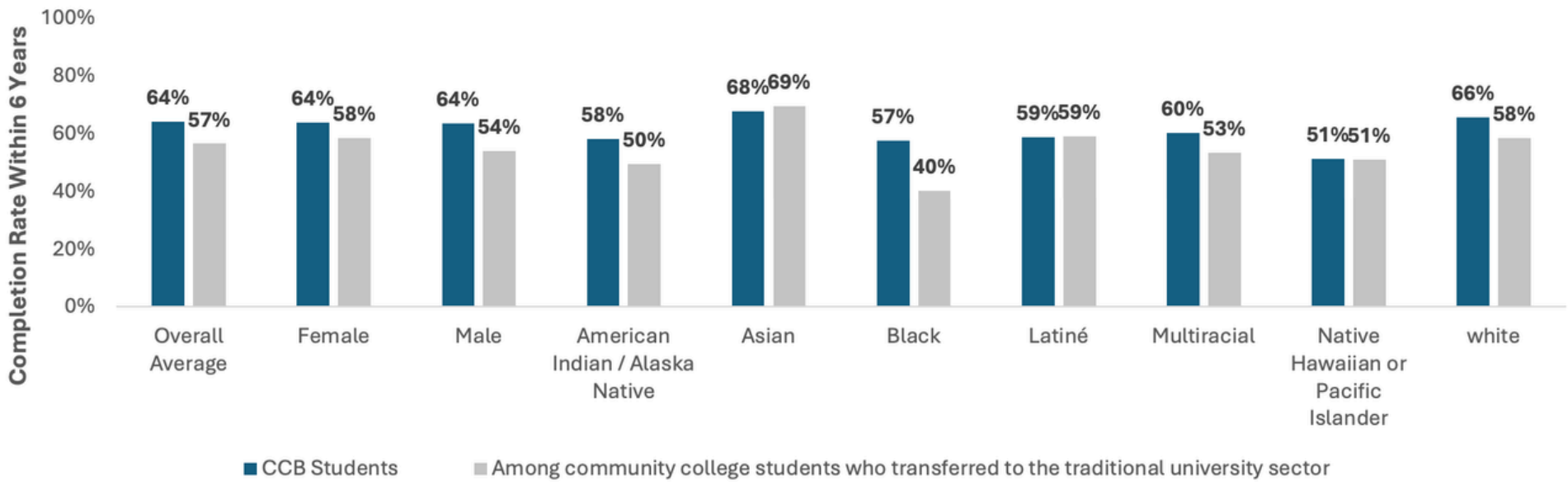


Figure 4. Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates, CCB vs. Community-College-to-Traditional-University Transfer Students: Gender and Race/Ethnicity



CCB Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Socioeconomic Status, Part- or Full-Time Status at CCB Entry, and Prior Community College Trajectories

We also examined CCB completion and time to degree rates by:

- Socioeconomic status (proxied by need-based aid recipients);
- Whether students were enrolled part- or full-time during their first term of CCB entry;
- Whether they were enrolled in another Washington community college prior to CCB entry;
- Whether they completed an associate degree; and
- Whether they completed an associate degree one year prior to CCB entry.

As displayed in Table 3, completion rates were slightly higher among students who received need-based aid, as of their first term of CCB entry. For example, the two-year completion rate for CCB students who received need-based aid was 47%, compared to 45% for students who did not receive need-based aid. By year six, completion rates were 73% and 70%, respectively, among CCB students who received need-based aid and those who did not.

Completion rates between students who enrolled full- versus part-time in their first term also reveal an interesting story. We found a 24 percentage-point difference between the two-year completion rates of part-time (30%) and full-time CCB entrants (54%). However, this difference closes to 15 percentage points for 6-year completion rates: CCB students who began full-time had a 76% completion rate within 6 years, compared to a 61% completion rate for students who began part-time. That said, completion rates for students entering CCB programs part-time compare favorably to the national average of completion for part-time students of any program (i.e., certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree) in six years (34.1%) (NSCRC, 2025).

61.0%

*Average six-year completion rate for **CCB students** who began part-time,*

–compared to–

34.1%

*the national six-year completion rate average for **part-time students of any program** (i.e., certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree).*
(NSCRC, 2025)

Table 3. CCB Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Need-Based Aid, Enrollment Intensity, and Prior Community College Trajectories

Need-Based Aid, Enrollment Intensity, and Prior Community College	Completion Rates				
	2 Years (n = 13,841)	3 Years (n = 11,057)	4 Years (n = 8,492)	5 Years (n = 5,430)	6 Years (n = 2,378)
Overall Average	**46%**	**60%**	**64%**	**67%**	**71%**
Received Need-Based Aid in First Term of CCB Entry					
Yes (n = 7,608)	47%	62%	65%	67%	73%
No (n = 9,138)	45%	59%	63%	66%	70%
Part- or Full-Time in First Term of CCB Entry					
Part-Time (n = 5,635)	30%	46%	52%	56%	61%
Full-Time (n = 11,111)	54%	67%	70%	73%	76%
Prior CC Trajectories					
Prior CC Enrollment (n = 15,321)	47%	61%	65%	68%	73%
Prior Associate Degree (n = 9,868)	52%	65%	69%	73%	75%
Completed CC Associate Degree Within One Year to CCB Entry					
Yes (n = 5,087)	54%	67%	71%	75%	76%
No (n = 11,659)	42%	57%	61%	63%	69%

For CCB students with a prior associate degree, nearly two-thirds completed their bachelor's degree within three years. Students who had some prior community college enrollment consistently had higher completion rates relative to the overall CCB completion rates.

CCB students who began full-time had a 76% completion rate within 6 years, compared to a 61% completion rate for students who began part-time.

CCB Time to Degree[1] and Completion[2] Rates by Program of Study, IPEDS Locale of Institution, and Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) Status

Across the board, completion rates were relatively high across different programs of study, with CCB programs in Education and Health Professions (including nursing) experiencing the highest completion rates (Table 4). The same was also true for rural institutions: Across two rural indicators, CCB programs situated in a rural locale or identified as a Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) had completion rates consistently above non-rural serving institutions (Table 4). CCB programs identified as rural locales by IPEDS had a 73% three-year completion rate, and those identified as an RSI had a 70% three-year completion rate.

Table 4. CCB Time to Degree and Completion Rates by Two-Digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Codes, IPEDS Locale of Institution, and RSI Status

CCB Programs by Two-Digit CIP, IPEDS Locale of Institution, and Rural-Serving Institution Status	Completion Rates				
	2 Years (n = 13,841)	3 Years (n = 11,057)	4 Years (n = 8,492)	5 Years (n = 5,430)	6 Years (n = 2,378)
Overall Average	**46%**	**60%**	**64%**	**67%**	**71%**
Four Largest CCB Programs by Two-Digit CIP					
Business (52) (n = 4,905)	45%	60%	64%	67%	71%
Computer and Information Sciences (11) (n = 4,126)	41%	59%	64%	67%	67%
Education (13) (n = 1,793)	52%	65%	69%	71%	73%
Health Professions (51) (n = 3,746)	50%	59%	62%	64%	78%
IPEDS Locale of Institution					
City (n = 11,536)	49%	64%	68%	71%	73%
Suburb (n = 4,091)	34%	47%	52%	55%	68%
Town (n = 920)	59%	66%	67%	70%	68%
Rural (n = 199)	64%	73%	75%	77%	76%
Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) Status					
Non-RSI (n = 14,057)	43%	58%	62%	65%	71%
RSI or High-RSI (n = 2,689)	60%	70%	72%	74%	72%

1 *Program of study was operationalized by linking CCB programs/majors to National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) two-digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes.*

2 *We assigned two measures of rurality to CCB institutions: (1) institutional geographic designations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) locale of different institutions; and (2) the metrics for Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) status as defined by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC, 2022).*

Why Might CCBs Be Faster and More Affordable?

These results show that CCB programs facilitate high completion rates and promising time to degree rates, and recent research (Vo, 2026) suggests that such results are not achieved by accident. Vo framed CCB programs as trajectory-responsive policies, whose institutional assumptions, assets, arrangements, and designs lend themselves to expanding college access, success, and equity for students who may not have had a feasible bachelor's degree pathway otherwise.

Through interviews with 25 California CCB students across five CCB programs, Vo reveals five common CCB design features that may shorten the time it takes for students to complete their degree. These design features include:

1. CCB programs that are geographically accessible and aligned to students' aspirations, conditions, interests, and trajectories.
2. CCB programs that are financially affordable in terms of college tuition and additional college costs (e.g., books, instructional materials, transportation).
3. CCB programs that are committed to aligning college with careers, including by incorporating work-based learning and internship opportunities as curricular requirements and having institutional practitioners and structures that facilitate pathways to such opportunities.
4. CCB programs that minimize administrative burdens in application processes, course registration procedures, and curricular programming.
    a. CCB programs that use clear application processes that recognize prior educational and work experiences and credentials while minimizing the administrative burdens on students.
    b. CCB programs that feature structured curricular pathways with accessible course availability/registration and course modalities/scheduling (e.g., online, hybrid, in-person, night, weekend courses).
5. CCB programs that feature academic communities, such as cohort-based programming, where institutional practitioners and students are able to collectively foster an environment of care, continuity, collaboration, and customization in their college experience.

Recommendations

Because of CCB programs' propensity to have these design features, along with their promising time to degree and completion rates, CCB programs are well-positioned to expand access to — and achievement of — the bachelor's degree for traditionally underserved students (Meza & Bragg, 2025; Pawlicki, 2023; Vo, 2026; Wetzstein et al., 2022). As such, we offer the following four recommendations for policy and practice.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Establish a standard, baseline, and defensible set of affordability metrics, including time to completion. This brief calculates concrete, ready-to-use data for three metrics: (a) average tuition per year; (2) completion rates at different time intervals; and (3) average time to completion after matriculation into a CCB program. Other states should calculate their own versions of these figures and consider comparing them with other bachelor's pathways. States should treat these annual cost figures as a baseline affordability metric to track and report consistently, giving policymakers and advocates a defensible, state-specific number to cite in legislative and budget conversations. Other metrics may be relevant as well, like capturing student loan rates in the short and long term.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Build robust, longitudinal data systems or strong data collaborations to make the completion and affordability benefits of CCB degrees explicit. The findings documented in this brief by race/ethnicity, age, enrollment intensity, and geography can only be addressed if states and institutions have the infrastructure to see them clearly. Washington's statewide administrative dataset made this analysis possible; other states and the federal government should invest in comparable systems so that CCB completion and time-to-degree patterns can be documented, monitored, and disaggregated. These systems should also be used to study and make explicit the completion and time-to-degree benefits of CCB degrees, tying those benefits directly to affordability so that data collection serves both accountability and the case for continued investment in CCB programs.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Continue to design CCB programs that honor and embrace the complexity of students' lives. The data revealed that students who could enroll full time completed at far higher rates than those enrolled part time after two years (54% vs. 30%, respectively). That said, part-time students achieved 61% completion by six years. This is important, as data consistently reveals that CCB students are different than students who attend traditional universities (CCBA & Bragg & Associates, 2024; Meza & Love, 2022; Meza & Vo, 2026). Many CCB students are adult learners, workers, and household caregivers for whom full-time enrollment may not be feasible. Rather than treating time to degree and full-time enrollment as a universal and rigid target, college and state leaders should support and build flexible pathways — like block scheduling, evening/weekend and hybrid course modalities, and accelerated options — that enable students to sustain enrollment at the intensity their lives allow (see Pawlicki, 2023).

RECOMMENDATION 4

Minimize administrative burdens at every stage of the student lifecycle. Students benefit when programs have streamlined application processes, recognize prior credentials and coursework, and reduce credit loss (Vo, 2026). Students with a prior associate degree, especially one completed within a year of CCB entry, experienced completion rates as high as 76% by the sixth year. Colleges and systems should invest in clear application processes, robust credit-for-prior-learning opportunities, and proactive advising/pedagogical practices so that students are not penalized administratively for the pathways that brought them to a CCB program.

Takeaways

Compared to traditional university transfer pathways, CCB students complete bachelor's degrees at notably higher rates within two years of entry (46% vs. 15%), and this completion advantage remains through six years after entry (71% vs. 61%) — all while serving a student population more likely to be adult learners, Black, and Latiné than bachelor's degree recipients nationally (Meza & Vo, 2026). These outcomes translate into fewer semesters of tuition, the potential for less credit loss, less accumulated debt, reduced opportunity costs from balancing work and school, and earlier entry into the workforce and local economies. Taken together, evidence supports that CCB programs are well-positioned to expand access to and achievement of the bachelor's degree for traditionally underserved students.

Appendix

Table 5. Two-, Four-, and Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates, Community College Successful Transfer vs. Community College Baccalaureate Students: : Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Social Contexts, Positions, and Trajectories	Completion Rates Within...								
	2 Years			4 Years			6 Years		
	CCB Students	CC University Transfer	% Point Diff	CCB Students	CC University Transfer	% Point Diff	CCB Students	CC University Transfer	% Point Diff
TOTAL	**46%**	**15%**	**31%**	**64%**	**57%**	**8%**	**71%**	**66%**	**6%**
Gender									
Female	47%	17%	30%	64%	58%	5%	74%	67%	7%
Male	44%	13%	31%	64%	54%	10%	68%	64%	5%
Race/Ethnicity									
American Indian/Alaska Native	34%	13%	21%	58%	50%	9%	56%	57%	-1%
Asian	47%	19%	27%	68%	69%	-2%	71%	79%	-7%
Black	40%	9%	31%	57%	40%	17%	63%	49%	13%
Latiné	42%	17%	26%	59%	59%	0%	73%	68%	5%
Multiracial	43%	14%	29%	60%	53%	7%	70%	63%	7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	40%	15%	24%	51%	51%	0%	53%	57%	-4%
white	48%	16%	33%	66%	58%	7%	73%	68%	5%

Note 1. *For display, we use the following abbreviations:*

- *CCB Students = Among CCB students who matriculated to upper-division coursework and began their bachelor's degree program.*
- *CC University Transfer = Among community college students who transferred to the traditional university sector.*

Note 2. *Gender non-binary and Race/Ethnicity: Not Listed are not displayed since such data are not available for the CC University Transfer data.*

About the Authors

Dr. Elizabeth Meza is a distinguished researcher and faculty instructor at the Evans School of Public Policy at the University of Washington and a UW Public Impact Research Fellow. A former community college faculty member and administrator, Elizabeth regularly publishes and speaks on community college baccalaureate degrees and STEM transfer education. Dr. Meza received a Ph.D. from the University of Washington and a M.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Davis Vo (he/him) is an education researcher at San José-Evergreen Community College District and Stanford University. He utilizes a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods and takes asset-based and equity-oriented approaches to examine how practices, policies, structures, and systems shape (in)equality/inequity, mobility, and stratification in education and the trajectories of students from historically minoritized communities. He holds a B.A. from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), an M.Ed. from the University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education, an M.S. from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Department of Statistics & Data Science, and a Ph.D. from UCLA, School of Education & Information Studies.

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