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The College-going Goal Is Closer Than It Appears: The Impact of Students Opting Out of Sharing Their College Information

October 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Wendy Davy, Debbie Yedlin and the Accountability and Data Governance teams at the Arizona Department of Education for providing invaluable assistance and access to their data sources. We also could not have attempted this project without the critical partnership of Rebecca McKay at ASSIST. Her knowledge of the postsecondary data and her inquisitive problem solving was invaluable.

By combining resources and building on projects like these, we hope to provide regular feedback to our local school systems in the quest to serve students and build a better future for Arizona.

Executive Summary

Arizona relies on the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to measure college-going and completion. Students can opt-out of NSC sharing their information with states and districts, which would make the reported college-going rate lower than the actual rate. In a 2017 report, NSC found that Arizona had one of the highest opt-out rates in the country. The purpose of this report is to examine the opt-out rate and its impact on our Progress Meter goals for college going.

AZTransfer collects data from the three state universities and nineteen community colleges on enrollments and degrees and certificates. There is no opt-out option for this ASSIST database because it is used by the colleges for sharing data on transfer students. We compared the data for these Arizona colleges from the NSC and ASSIST databases to determine the frequency of opting out. AZTransfer also includes certificates earned at community colleges, data that is not currently available elsewhere, and would increase Arizona's attainment numbers.

We found that there was a 2% to 4% opt-out rate for universities and a 10% to 30%+ rate for individual community colleges, for an overall opt-out rate average of 13.5% in 2018, with a range of 13% to 19%, depending upon the year. The opt-out rate by ethnicity and poverty were remarkably similar within colleges but varied greatly across colleges. This may indicate that how colleges present the opt-out option influences the opt-out rate for that college and all its subgroups.

This has important implications for the college-going Progress Meter Goal, ABOR's annual college enrollment and attainment report, and school letter grades that are impacted by college going. Currently, the Progress Meter goals indicate that 53% of graduating seniors go on to post-secondary education. But, the true number would be 58% if we included the college goers who opted-out of the NSC reporting. In other words, although we are not at the goal of 70%, high schools are doing a better job of sending graduates to college, and community colleges and universities are doing a better job of educating students, than current metrics indicate.

These results show a need for a new calculation of college-going and completion. We should use the ASSIST data for the state universities and community colleges, and NSC for the remaining schools. There will still be an impact from NSC opt-outs attending private schools and out-of-state colleges, but the results will be much more accurate, because about 70% of college-going graduates from Arizona public schools attend Arizona community colleges and state universities.

Understanding College Going

Improving the college-going rate is so crucial to Arizona's future that the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) includes it in its accountability measures: high schools earn credit in the school accountability system for the percentage of their students who enroll in post-secondary education after high school. To be able to compete in the economy of the future, the state of Arizona set a goal of 70% college-going by 2030 (Expect More Arizona, 2019). How ambitious is this goal? To put it into perspective: According to the Arizona Board of Regents, only 53% of Arizona's high school students in the Class of 2018 enrolled in a two- or four-year college after

graduation (Arizona Board of Regents, 2020). This is far below the national college-going rate of 69% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

To understand Arizona's college-going rates and trends, we need an accurate measure that we can use to investigate down to the subgroup level, and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is the comprehensive tool that has been used for this purpose. NSC collects enrollment and degree data from 99% of all public and private post-secondary institutions in the U.S. (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). Every year, ADE uploads a list of Arizona public school graduates to NSC, and NSC returns data on whether each student is enrolled, at what institution, and if they graduated. This is the source of data currently used in Arizona's high school accountability system.

The NSC results are not complete, however, since students have the option of opting out of releasing their information. This opt-out rate has been a topic of both curiosity and concern. Some people do not realize that there is a slight (or significant) undercount of matriculation and attainment when using NSC data. Others wonder if certain types of students or certain types of schools are encouraged to opt-out more than others, or whether more and more students are opting out now in the age of privacy concerns and data breaches.

Arizona's Extremely High Opt-Out Rate

In 2017, NSC released a study of opt-out rates in every state (National Student Clearinghouse 2017). Arizona had one of the highest in the country at 8%. The state-level data in the report also broke down the opt-out rate by type of college: 2-year public colleges in Arizona had an opt-out rate between 19.75% (2017) and 24.31% (2013), while 4-year public colleges had an opt-out rate between 0.93% (2017) and 2.69% (2013). Nationwide, 4-year colleges had lower opt-out rates than 2-year colleges, and again, Arizona was singled out for having an opt-out rate of 22% for 2-year colleges, which was four times the national rate (National Student Clearinghouse 2017).

But we do not know annual opt-out rates because ADE does not have unrestricted access to the internal files at NSC, nor is this study updated every year. In Arizona, we are also concerned about the performance of various subgroups (by gender, ethnicity, poverty factor, etc.), as well as whether certain districts or school types have higher opt-out rates than others. The NSC report did not give demographic breakdowns needed to address these topics.

To be able to identify how many and what kind of students are opting out of NSC annually, we need an alternative data source, one that we can access every year. Although there is no alternative to the nationwide coverage that NSC provides, there is a more complete statewide data repository for 2-year and 4-year public colleges in Arizona called the Arizona Statewide System for Information on Student Transfers (ASSIST). ASSIST collects enrollment and degree data on students who attend any of the 22 public colleges in Arizona: three 4-year public universities (the ABOR colleges are: Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, University of Arizona) and 19 public community colleges.

The 22 public colleges began sharing their internal files with each other more than a decade ago to track students as they moved among these colleges (AZTransfer, 2020). ASSIST does not have an opt-out option, which means ASSIST should have more complete data than NSC,

as long as we are comparing students who enrolled in public colleges within Arizona. This should be a fairly good estimate for Arizona because out of the 53% of public school students who enroll in post-secondary each year, about 70% will enroll in a public Arizona college at some point in their lives, while the rest enroll in private colleges or colleges outside of Arizona. Our estimate of the opt-out rate for Arizona is, therefore, based just on public school students who have attended public colleges in Arizona.

How Many Students Opt-out?

We calculated opt-outs by merging ASSIST and National Student Clearinghouse data. The databases were combined by matching on name, birthdate, student ID, college name and academic year, and the file was then limited to Arizona community colleges and state universities. The methodology is described in detail in the following section.

The average opt-out rate for public school students who graduated high school and enrolled in a public college in Arizona was 13.5% in 2018. Looking at the whole time period of the study, between 2012-2018, about 3% opted out if they enrolled in a 4-year public university, and between 13% to 19% opted out if they enrolled in a 2-year public community college, with individual college rates varying greatly. We looked at various subgroups (type of school and type of student), but in the end, how high or how low the opt-out rate was depended more on which post-secondary institution a student attended than the subgroup to which they belonged. Every subgroup had high opt-out rates at community colleges and low opt-out rates at ABOR colleges.

This suggests that something about the process of enrolling is contributing to the opt-out rate. It could be how the choice to opt out is presented (an opt-out or opt-in system), or whether the opt-out option is prominently displayed or hidden in an obscure spot in the paperwork, or whether applicants are required to answer the opt-out question or have the ability to skip it, or how much of an effort a student has to make in order to deliberately opt-out of the NSC. This is something that will require additional study.

Table 1. Opt-out Rate by High School Graduation Year

NOTE: 2018 is based on Fall Semester

All Schools Combined Overall & by Subgroup:	High School Graduation Year							Average 2012-2018
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
Overall #	29750	25090	20075	16065	12915	8523	4209	*
Overall %	18.7%	17.2%	14.6%	13.4%	13.7%	12.9%	13.5%	15.5%
By Semester of Post-Secondary Enrollment:								
Fall Semester #	21029	17849	14866	12114	10255	7185	4209	*
Fall Semester %	16.2%	14.9%	12.9%	11.8%	12.5%	12.0%	13.5%	13.7%
Spring Semester #	4952	3978	2780	2010	1258	644	*	*
Spring Semester %	26.4%	25.1%	20.6%	19.5%	19.3%	18.9%	*	22.9%
Summer Semester #	3695	3218	2404	1932	1388	691	*	*
Summer Semester %	36.6%	35.3%	28.9%	27.9%	28.1%	25.2%	*	31.7%

By High School Location (all colleges attended combined):								
Apache County #	54	96	74	54	46	27	15	*
Apache County %	8.7%	17.1%	18.8%	14.9%	15.9%	11.2%	15.0%	14.3%
Cochise County #	625	496	425	337	263	168	106	*
Cochise County %	20.1%	19.9%	17.7%	16.2%	17.1%	15.7%	17.8%	18.2%
Coconino County #	193	158	117	169	90	42	40	*
Coconino County %	8.4%	6.9%	5.7%	8.8%	6.3%	4.1%	8.4%	7.0%
Gila County #	157	130	132	89	77	43	19	*
Gila County %	18.2%	18.7%	20.9%	16.8%	17.0%	13.7%	15.3%	17.9%
Graham County #	123	49	54	61	39	33	14	*
Graham County %	15.2%	7.8%	7.8%	9.3%	7.8%	8.9%	8.1%	9.7%
Greenlee County #	21	13	34	23	*	*	*	*
Greenlee County %	12.7%	6.1%	17.3%	15.5%	5.0%	7.0%	18.4%	11.4%
La Paz County #	19	16	12	*	*	*	*	*
La Paz County %	8.2%	6.8%	8.1%	4.8%	3.2%	10.6%	13.6%	7.1%
Maricopa County #	21409	18259	14144	11265	9299	6248	3103	*
Maricopa County %	19.6%	18.2%	14.9%	13.5%	14.1%	13.7%	14.5%	16.1%
Mohave County #	168	116	127	111	87	78	36	*
Mohave County %	7.5%	5.3%	6.2%	5.9%	6.3%	7.7%	7.1%	6.4%
Navajo County #	291	283	250	175	140	63	35	*
Navajo County %	13.8%	15.9%	15.9%	13.5%	14.7%	9.7%	10.3%	14.2%
Pima County #	5081	3997	3504	2857	2154	1324	466	*
Pima County %	23.3%	20.7%	19.7%	18.6%	18.5%	15.2%	11.5%	19.6%
Pinal County #	563	543	449	367	250	232	237	*
Pinal County %	11.9%	12.8%	10.7%	10.5%	8.5%	10.5%	21.9%	11.5%
Santa Cruz County #	376	411	317	210	206	94	29	*
Santa Cruz County	21.8%	24.3%	19.0%	17.1%	19.7%	11.8%	7.3%	19.2%
Yavapai County #	275	207	171	139	108	62	41	*
Yavapai County %	8.0%	6.9%	5.7%	5.2%	5.5%	4.5%	6.0%	6.2%
Yuma County #	395	316	263	192	145	94	54	*
Yuma County %	6.3%	5.2%	4.9%	4.1%	4.2%	3.7%	4.4%	4.9%
By Type of High School Attended:								
Rural high schools #	2046	1864	1605	1282	1040	645	362	*
Rural high schools %	16.4%	15.8%	14.4%	13.4%	14.2%	12.3%	14.1%	14.7%
District schools #	27164	23123	18442	14615	11712	7657	3721	*
District schools %	18.4%	17.1%	14.5%	13.3%	13.7%	12.8%	13.3%	15.3%
Charter schools #	2586	1967	1633	1450	1203	866	488	*
Charter schools %	22.3%	19.2%	16.7%	14.4%	14.3%	13.7%	15.4%	17.1%
Virtual schools #	591	474	374	303	274	217	99	*
Virtual schools %	24.7%	23.6%	20.6%	18.4%	17.3%	20.8%	21.3%	21.3%
Alternative schools #	1575	1126	973	768	591	455	230	*
Alternative schools %	24.3%	23.1%	23.0%	19.1%	19.7%	21.7%	24.3%	22.3%
By Demographic Subgroup:								
Female #	16822	14223	11407	8941	7094	4604	2200	*
Female %	18.9%	17.5%	14.8%	13.2%	13.5%	12.3%	12.6%	15.4%
Male #	12928	10867	8668	7124	5821	3919	2009	*
Male %	18.4%	16.9%	14.4%	13.6%	14.1%	13.6%	14.6%	15.5%
White #	15318	12540	9720	7661	5952	3743	1798	*
White %	18.1%	16.5%	13.8%	12.8%	13.1%	12.0%	12.6%	14.8%
Hispanic/Latino #	10432	8948	7370	6236	5025	3499	1798	*
Hispanic/Latino %	19.9%	18.1%	15.6%	14.5%	14.6%	13.9%	14.6%	16.4%
American Indian #	639	519	488	393	326	218	107	*
American Indian %	14.8%	15.1%	14.2%	14.2%	14.4%	13.5%	14.0%	14.5%
Black/African American #	1684	1403	1188	900	722	521	259	*

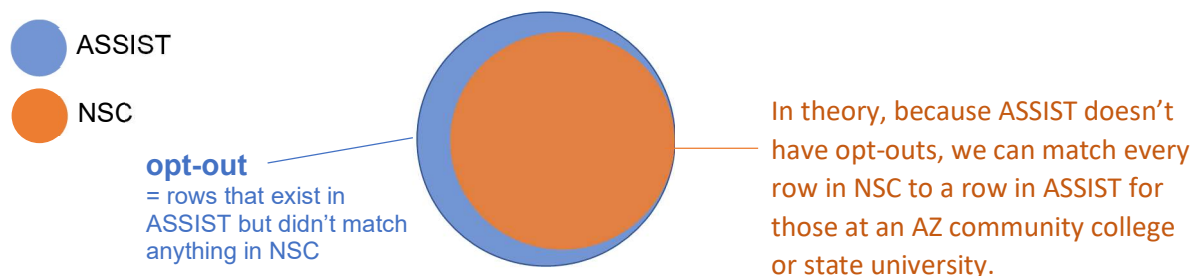
Black/African American %	20.1%	19.6%	17.1%	15.4%	15.0%	15.6%	16.1%	17.5%
Asian #	1343	1297	967	555	538	328	148	*
Asian %	17.4%	17.3%	13.9%	9.7%	11.6%	10.5%	10.1%	13.9%
Pacific Islander #	65	49	68	34	44	20	11	*
Pacific Islander %	24.3%	17.0%	20.9%	11.5%	19.6%	12.4%	15.5%	17.8%
Multiple Races #	269	334	274	286	308	194	88	*
Multiple Races %	16.7%	17.8%	13.7%	11.2%	14.4%	12.3%	12.1%	14.0%
No poverty flag #	15879	13225	10500	8176	6468	4108	1947	*
No poverty flag %	18.4%	16.9%	14.3%	12.9%	13.3%	12.2%	12.4%	15.1%
Has poverty flag #	13871	11865	9575	7889	6447	4415	2262	*
Has poverty flag %	19.0%	17.6%	15.0%	13.9%	14.2%	13.7%	14.5%	15.9%
Students with Disabilities #	2413	2130	1752	1441	1193	829	481	*
Students with Disabilities %	22.7%	22.5%	20.6%	18.6%	19.4%	19.4%	22.2%	20.9%

How Did We Calculate Opt-out Rates?

Both ASSIST and NSC have multiple rows per student, with one row for every semester of college enrolled. The ASSIST and NSC data files were limited to Arizona community colleges and state universities and then merged together. If a row of data in ASSIST matched a row of data in NSC based on matching variables, then it was a match. The rows in ASSIST which did not have a counterpart in NSC would then be the opt-out cases. Because ASSIST is the more complete data source, we used that as the denominator:

$$\text{opt-out rate} = \frac{\text{rows that exist in ASSIST but do not exist in NSC}}{\text{rows that exist in ASSIST}}$$

Theoretically, both ASSIST and NSC have multiple rows per student, with one row for every semester of college enrolled, and all we would have to do is to drop duplicate rows and merge the two files together to see which rows matched and which rows did not.



In reality, it was more complicated than that. There were detailed matching protocols and methods used to merge the files, however there were some anomalies we are still investigating. The details are presented in a companion report that describes the details of the matching process and the four matching methods we studied.

Implications of This Opt-Out Study

College-going and attainment are important state goals in the Arizona Education Progress Meter, and our metrics need to be as accurate as possible. We have two overlapping and

complementary data sources: ASSIST has a fairly accurate and complete method for identifying Arizona high school students who attend public community colleges and universities in Arizona, while NSC covers public colleges, private colleges, tribal colleges, and out-of-state colleges. Ideally, both data sources should be used together every year to calculate a more complete college-going rate for Arizona.

It is recommended that college-going and completion be calculated using ASSIST for Arizona community colleges and state universities, and the National Student Clearinghouse for other institutions. This will give us a more complete picture, although it will still undercount some enrollments and completions because of the possible NSC opt-outs in private colleges and out-of-state colleges.

This study suggests that using a combined approach will give a significant bump in the reported college-going rate. Since this is a major policy focus, this will be positive news for Arizona's high schools, colleges and those who judge the education system by enrollment and attainment outcomes.

By looking at a more complete picture of where students enroll in college, we can address some very interesting questions, such as what types of students go to what types of post-secondary institutions? What types of high schools send more students to what types of post-secondary institutions? Where do the most academically prepared students go for post-secondary? Where do our CTE concentrators go, and what programs or majors do they enter? Do our high school graduates have the same opportunities and successful outcomes – no matter where they attend high school?

By studying college preparation, college going, persistence and attainment, Arizona policymakers will be able to conduct a comprehensive, system-wide evaluation of how best to prepare students for the fast-moving, constantly changing, technologically advanced economy of the future in which post-secondary training plays a key part.

At the school level, each school should be aware that where their graduates enroll – whether it is mostly in a community college or mostly a 4-year college – will impact how accurate their college-going numbers have been. If a majority of students at a high school go on to community colleges, then the NSC college-going rate has been a substantial undercount. If a majority of students enroll in ABOR universities, then it has only been a slight undercount. This is important information for the school, and may also impact the accountability system school letter grades.

It appears that opting out is a function of the institution attended, so we should examine the causes of high opt-out rates at the community colleges and low rates at the universities. Students should be able to make informed decisions about sharing their data, and the differences in rates suggests that the opt-out rates are probably driven more by the college process than what students would typically choose. Examining the enrollment process at community colleges and universities is needed to see how they differ in offering the option. Perhaps it is a design problem, a training issue, a staffing issue, or differing approaches to student privacy.

Having accurate metrics is crucial to determining our progress and goal achievement. This report highlights one way we could improve our reporting and accurately show the success of our community colleges and universities in educating Arizona's students.

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DATASETS

Datasets were provided by the Arizona Department of Education and ASSIST and merged securely at the Arizona Department of Education. No student level data were released outside the secure ADE system.