

CLEP and Completion:

The Causal Impact on College Graduation of Earning Credit Through CLEP

The College-Level Examination Program® (CLEP®) offers students an opportunity to earn college credits by demonstrating mastery in over 30 unique subjects. Not surprisingly, students with high CLEP scores are more likely to complete college. But how much of this completion boost is attributable to earning a credit-granting CLEP score? New research from the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, Vanderbilt University, and the College Board isolates the *causal* impact of earning a credit-granting CLEP score. This study is the first of its kind to identify the graduation boost directly attributable to passing a CLEP exam.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Researchers considered all CLEP exam takers who tested between 2008 and 2015, and they followed these students through college enrollment to college completion. CLEP exam scores and demographics were collected from the College Board and college enrollment and completion from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). To estimate the causal impact of earning CLEP credit, the researchers used an analytic technique known as regression discontinuity.

Regression discontinuity is a fairly straightforward approach to making causal claims in the absence of a randomized controlled trial. With this method, the researchers compared students who earned CLEP exam scores barely high enough to earn credit—often 50 on a 20–80 scale—to students who just missed the CLEP credit-granting score. These two groups of students are essentially identical, with the former analogous to a *treatment group* in a randomized controlled trial and the latter analogous to a *control group*.

RESULTS

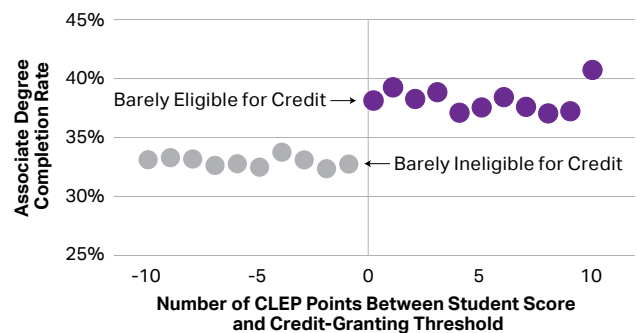


Figure 1: Associate Degree Completion Rates Among Two-Year College Enrollees, by CLEP Performance Relative to College-Specific Minimum Credit-Granting Policy.

To demonstrate the intuition behind our analytic methods, we show in Figure 1 the relationship between associate degree completion and the student's CLEP score on her first exam, expressed as the number of points exceeding or falling short of the minimum CLEP credit-granting score at the student's college. The purple dots represent CLEP scores eligible for college credit, and the gray dots represent CLEP scores ineligible for college credit. The rightmost gray dot and the leftmost purple dot represent CLEP scores differing by just one point, yet the difference in associate degree completion between these two points is 5–6 percentage points, from 33% to nearly 39%.

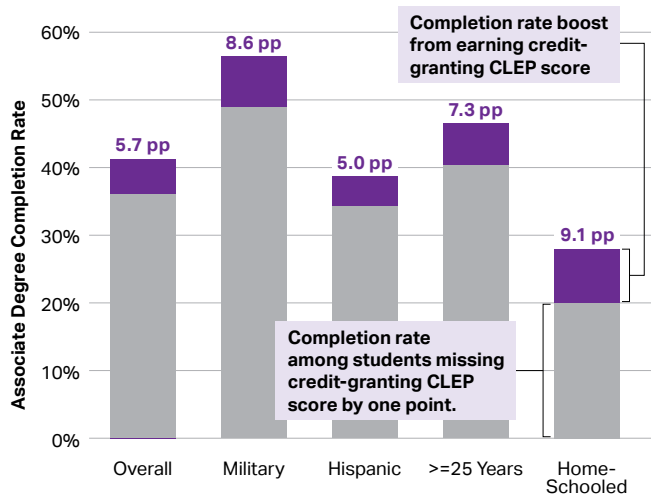


Figure 2: Associate Degree Completion Rate Increase from CLEP Credit Among Two-Year College Enrollees, by Student Subgroup.

In Figure 2, we graphically show discontinuities in associate degree completion by a student's CLEP score relative to the college-specific minimum credit-granting score. The height of the gray bar represents the average associate degree completion score among students one point shy of their college's minimum credit-granting CLEP score. The height of the purple bar indicates the additional completion boost, in percentage points (pp), attributable to earning CLEP credit. Among all students, earning a credit-granting CLEP score increases the probability of earning an associate degree by 5.7 percentage points, or 17.3% (calculated as 5.7/32.9). For military students and nontraditional students (>=25 years old), the impacts of earning a credit-granting CLEP score are even larger—8.6 percentage points (18.1%) and 7.3 percentage points (19.5%), respectively.

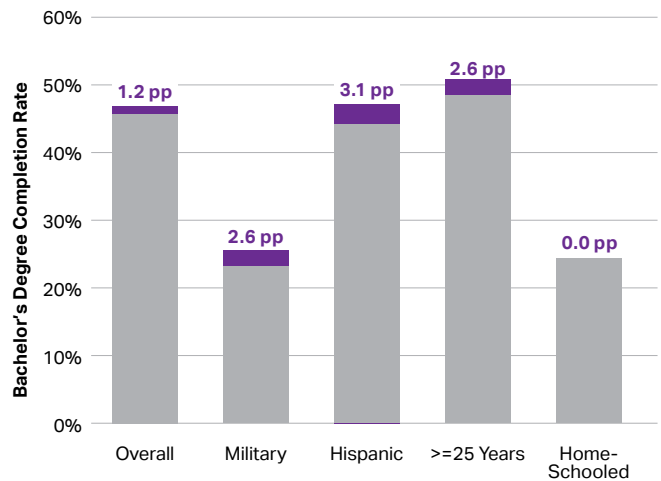


Figure 3: Bachelor's Degree Completion Rate Increase from CLEP Credit Among Four-Year College Enrollees, by Student Subgroup.

Figure 3 shows the bachelor's degree completion boost from earning a credit-granting CLEP score among students enrolled in four-year colleges. Earning a credit-granting CLEP score increases the probability of bachelor's degree completion by 1.2 percentage points, or 2.6%. That estimate is larger for military students (2.6 percentage points), Hispanic students (3.1 percentage points), and students older than 24 (2.6 percentage points). The bachelor's degree completion boosts are more modest than the associate degree boosts because the credits required for a bachelor's degree are generally about twice the number required for an associate degree.

Overall, credit through CLEP exams is one of the most cost-effective paths to increasing college completion rates, especially for students seeking an associate degree. This study shows that an \$85 exam is a cost-effective way to reduce duplicative coursework and ensure that students earn degrees and enter the workforce in a timely fashion.

You can access the research paper at ssrn.com/abstract=2933695.