Methodological Notes

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National Coverage of the Data

As of fall 2024, institutions actively submitting enrollment data to the Clearinghouse account for 97 percent of all enrollments at Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. Because Clearinghouse participation grew over the period covered by this report, and because coverage of institutions (i.e., percentage of all institutions participating in the Clearinghouse) is not 100 percent for any individual year, weights were applied by institutional sector and state to better approximate enrollments at all institutions nationally. Using all IPEDS Title IV, degree-granting institutions as the base population, weights for each institutional sector and state were calculated using the inverse of the rate of enrollment coverage for that sector and state in the relevant year. Given the unavailability of fall 2024 IPEDS enrollments prior to publication, fall 2023 IPEDS enrollments were used as the basis for calculating the Clearinghouse coverage rates for fall 2024 and fall 2025. For detailed statistics on enrollment coverage, as well as other aspects of Clearinghouse data, view "Working With Our Data."

Differences from IPEDS Data

National Student Clearinghouse data are nonadjudicated, administrative data that come directly from college and university registrars. The data differ from IPEDS survey data in several important ways:

1. Term definition: Most institutions use an October 15 census date when counting fall enrollments for IPEDS, but institutions have some flexibility in determining whether a given term should be counted as a fall term. For Clearinghouse reporting, institutions provide the start and end dates for each enrollment, rather than formally designating fall or spring terms. Fall terms included in the *Final Fall Enrollment Trends* are those that:

   a. began between August 15 and October 31, inclusive or

   b. ended between September 15 and November 30, inclusive or

   c. began before August 15 AND ended after November 30.

2. Degree-granting status: When referencing IPEDS enrollment counts, it is important to distinguish counts limited to degree-granting institutions from those that also include non-degree-granting institutions. NCES publishes both of these counts in IPEDS First-Look Reports. The Clearinghouse counts in this report are postsecondary institutions in the U.S. that submit student enrollment to the Clearinghouse.

3. Enrollment status changes: Institutions submit data to the Clearinghouse throughout a given term, capturing changes in enrollment status from one submission to the next, with each showing the student enrolled as either full time, three-quarters time, half time, or less than half time during the term. For IPEDS reporting, an institution generally counts a student according to the student's enrollment status as of the institution's IPEDS census date.

Institutional Sector Classification

This report defines institution sectors primarily based on the Carnegie Basic Classification. Carnegie Classification and IPEDS sector designations align for the most part, but when there are differences, we follow the Carnegie Classification. These discrepancies mostly impact Primarily Associate Degree Granting Baccalaureate Institutions (PABs; see below). The 2018 Carnegie Classification was used to assign sectors for fall 2020 and the 2021 Carnegie Classification for fall 2021 to fall 2025. Where the institutions' Carnegie Classifications carry no information as to 2- versus 4-year status, or are not included in the Carnegie Classifications, IPEDS sectors are used. All sector classifications are at the branch campus level, meaning that branch campus sectors may vary from main campus sectors. This includes PABs (see below) which were previously identified only at the main campus level.

Primarily Associate Degree Granting Baccalaureate (PAB) Institutions

As more and more institutions that previously focused solely on granting associate degrees have begun to offer bachelor's degree programs, there has been a surge in IPEDS reclassification of 2-year institutions as 4-year institutions, since IPEDS assigns 2- or 4-year designations based on program offerings. However, many of these reclassified institutions still confer most awards at the associate degree level. These are considered primarily associate degree granting baccalaureate (PAB) institutions.

We utilize the 2018 Carnegie Basic Classification to identify PABs for fall 2020 and the 2021 Basic Classification to identify PABs for fall 2021 to fall 2025. PABs are defined as institutions that offer at least one baccalaureate degree program and award more than half of their degrees at the associate level. These institutions are made up of two subcategories:

- *Baccalaureate/Associate Colleges - Associate Dominant (code 14):* institutions that award 90 percent or more of degrees at the associate level, or
- *Baccalaureate/Associate Colleges - Mixed Baccalaureate/Associate (code 23):* institutions that award more than 50 percent but less than 90 percent of degrees at the associate level.

This method identifies institutions across control groups (e.g., public, private nonprofit) – PAB control is identified using IPEDS data. We only report enrollment trends separately for public PABs. Enrollment at private PABs is included in totals. Public PABs account for about 92 percent of all PAB enrollment for 2020 and about 95 percent of all PAB enrollment between fall 2021 and fall 2025. One drawback of the Carnegie approach is that years in which a new classification is released are subject to large sector reclassifications between PABs and other sectors. Because of this, readers are encouraged to exercise caution in evaluating PAB enrollment trends between fall 2020 and fall 2021. Some of these changes are due to a net move of institutions out of the PAB category in the 2021 Carnegie Classification. For example, the large reported decrease in bachelor's enrollment between fall 2020 and fall 2021 at public PABs is a function of many institutions moving out of the PAB category and into a four-year designation. Many of these schools were among the 23-designated PABs which granted higher shares of bachelor's degrees.

Primarily Online Institutions and Multi-State Institutions

Primarily Online Institutions (POIs) are identified based on the distance education survey items in the IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey . Any institution with more than 90 percent of its students (undergraduates and graduates combined) across all campuses (main and branches combined) enrolled exclusively in distance education courses (online) is considered a POI. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of institutions with more than 90 percent online enrollment more than quadrupled in 2020-2021 compared to the previous academic year. To account for institutions that temporarily shifted to online instruction during academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, our methodology considers an institution to be a POI in those pandemic years if 1) 90 percent of students were enrolled in exclusively distance education and 2) the institution had at least 80 percent exclusively online enrollment in 2019-2020. As of academic year 2022-2023, the methodology returns to the single-rule 90 percent threshold.

Multi-State Institutions are those with at least one branch campus that is operative in a state different from the main campus (six-digit OPEID). Institutional locations are identified based on IPEDS Institutional Characteristics file for each respective year from fall 2020 to fall 2023. The 2023 survey was used for fall 2023 to fall 2025. Institutions in U.S. territories that have at least one campus in the United States are included.

A total of 70 institutions are identified in the Clearinghouse data as Primarily Online and/or Multi-State Institutions as of fall 2023. POIs and multi-state institutions are combined for state-level analyses given POIs are predominantly for-profit 4-year, multi-state institutions.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965, HBCUs were established prior to 1964, with the principal mission of educating black Americans and are accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the U.S. Secretary of Education to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered. Currently, there are 94 HBCUs identified in the Clearinghouse data. Because coverage of HBCU enrollment in Clearinghouse data varies by institutional sector, the HBCU results are based on a panel of institutions that submitted data across all recent three years (2023-2025). The institution coverage of HBCUs between 2023 and 2025 is 68 percent.

Locale (Campus Setting)

Locale (Campus Setting) refers to the geographic location of a college categorized on a continuum ranging from urban to rural, as defined by IPEDS. The IPEDS codes incorporate the campus location's population size and distance from an urbanized area, resulting in 12 distinct codes, grouped into the following four categories:

- *Urban*: Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city
- *Suburban*: Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area
- *Town*: Territory inside an urban cluster and outside an urbanized area
- *Rural*: Territory outside of an urban cluster and outside an urbanized area

Please note that all locale analyses are unweighted, meaning that they are unadjusted for differences in the coverage of the Clearinghouse's enrollment data by locale.

Community College Program Focus

The program focus of a community college is classified in the following four categories based on the Carnegie Classification for Associate Colleges:

- *High Transfer* – Institutions where 35.7% or fewer of their awards were in career and technical disciplines
- *Mixed Transfer/Vocational* – Institutions where between 35.7 and 53.8% of their awards were in career and technical disciplines
- *High Vocational* – Institutions with at least 53.8% of their awards were considered high career and technical program mix
- *Other/Missing* – Includes institutions classified either as "special-focus two-year institutions" and those without a basic Carnegie classification

The 2018 classification was used for fall 2020 and the 2021 classification for fall 2021 to fall 2025. This measure is applied only to public 2-year institutions. PABs are not "Associate Colleges" in the Carnegie classification. Their codes do not include information on program focus. Analyses using this variable are unweighted, meaning that they are unadjusted for the coverage of the Clearinghouse's enrollment data by program focus.

Admissions Selectivity

Admissions selectivity is measured using the 2016 Barron's Selectivity Index, which evaluates the competitiveness of an institution based on several undergraduate admissions factors such as an institution's acceptance rate, as well as the college admissions test scores, high school GPAs, and high school rankings of its admitted students. Please note that all admissions selectivity analyses are unweighted, meaning that they are unadjusted for the coverage of the Clearinghouse's enrollment data. We report on this measure for public and private nonprofit 4-year institutions only. Utilizing the 2016 Barron's selectivity list, the ranking categories are as follows:

Highly Selective: Institutions identified as either "Most Competitive" or "Highly Competitive" according to the Barron's Selectivity Index. Their definitions are as follows:

- *Most Competitive*: Institutions that generally admit less than a third of their total applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally have a high school class rank in the top 10-20 percent of their graduating class, and high school grade averages from A to B+. SAT/ACT scores are in the top 80th percentile.

- *Highly Competitive*: Institutions that generally admit between a third to half of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally are in the top 20-35 percent of their high school graduating class, with high school grade averages from B+ to B. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 75th percentile.

Very Competitive: Institutions that generally admit between 50-75 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally are in the top 35-50 percent of their graduating class and have high school grade averages of a B- or better. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 67th percentile.

Competitive: Institutions that generally admit between 75-85 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted are generally in the top 50-65 percent of their high school graduating class and have a high school grade average of a B- or better. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 60th percentile.

Less Selective: Institutions identified as either "Less Competitive," "Noncompetitive," or "Unranked," according to the Barron's Selectivity Index. Their definitions are as follows:

- *Less Competitive*: Institutions that generally admit more than 85 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally rank in the top 65 percent of their graduating class and have high school grade averages below a C. SAT and ACT scores are below the top 60th percentile.

- *Noncompetitive*: Institutions that either admit more than 98 percent of their applicant pool, admit all in-state residents, but have some requirements for out-of-state students, or require evidence of a high school diploma from an accredited school.

- *Unranked*: All institutions not otherwise categorized in the Barron's selectivity index.

The Barron's Selectivity Index also includes a category called Special Focus which are institutions that are specialized, such as professional schools of art, music, or other disciplines. Schools oriented towards adult learners are also sometimes in this category. Given the Special Focus category includes institutions that span the range of admissions selectivity groups outlined above, these institutions (accounting for 1-2 percent of undergraduate enrollment at public and private nonprofit 4-year institutions) were not included in the admissions selectivity analysis.

Major Field of Study

Major fields of study across all years have been harmonized to reflect the 2020 NCES Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP). Beginning with the fall 2023 report, national enrollment by major field is now available at the four-digit CIP level. The four-digit level provides an intermediate level of detail between the two-digit, broad major families that we continue to report on and the most-specific 6-digit codes. Four-digit codes that have 100 or fewer enrollments or are reported by fewer than three institutions in a given level (4-year, 2-year, PAB) and year have been suppressed.

First-Time Freshman and Dual Enrollment

First-time freshmen are defined as those students pursuing an undergraduate credential of any kind who had no enrollment or degree or certificate award records at a U.S. postsecondary institution prior to the respective fall term start date, unless the previous enrollment record was before they turned 18 years of age or before they graduated from high school (dual enrollment), where high school graduation status is known in Clearinghouse data.

Due to the timing of high school diploma data availability, nearly all freshmen with prior enrollment records are identified using the age 18 threshold. We therefore consider undergraduate enrollees 17 and younger to be dual enrollees.

First-time freshmen 18-year-olds are those first-time freshmen who are 18 years old as of their institution's fall term start date.

Credential Type

The type of credential that a student's program of study leads to is reported to the Clearinghouse with each enrollment record. The reporting categories are:

- non-credential program
- undergraduate certificate or diploma program
- associate degree
- bachelor's degree
- post-baccalaureate certificate
- master's degree
- doctoral degree
- first-professional degree
- graduate/professional certificate

In this report, the "Graduate – Other" category includes post-baccalaureate certificates as well as a small number of non-credential enrollments (about 2% of non-credential enrollments in each year) reported as graduate level by institutions. The "Undergraduate – Other" category includes the remaining non-credential enrollments as well as enrollments that are missing credential level information and are assumed to be non-credential. Enrollment records that are missing credential level information account for about 5 percent of enrollment records included in this report depending on the year.

Gender Imputation

Institutions reported student gender to the Clearinghouse for a little over 80 percent of all students included in this report. Gender data for the remaining students were imputed using a table of name-gender pairs that the Research Center developed using data publicly available from the Census Bureau and the Social Security Administration as well as the institution-reported data. The imputation used only those pairs in which the name had at least two instances and was associated with a single gender in at least 95 percent of the instances. The imputation is accurate in 99.6 percent of the cases where gender was reported by institutions. For a detailed document describing this approach, see "Working With Our Data."

Race/Ethnicity Data Coverage and Estimation

The Clearinghouse collects race and ethnicity data as an optional part of the enrollment reports it receives from institutions. The reporting categories are: Asian, Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native (Native American in this report), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Non-Resident Alien (International in this report), Two or More Races (Multiracial in this report), White, Unknown (for students who opt not to report race/ethnicity to their institution), and Missing (for students whose institutions did not report any race/ethnicity data to the Clearinghouse). Due to the optional nature of reporting, there are between 13.4 and 17.1 percent of undergraduates reported race/ethnicity Missing across years in this report. The rate is higher for freshmen, who have the least amount of time for a valid race/ethnicity to be reported to the Clearinghouse. To address this, undergraduate and freshmen enrollments by race and ethnicity are estimated for the most recent year (fall 2025) based on previous years' patterns of data reporting. The Missing rate after adjustments is 13.3% percent for all undergraduates (17.1% before adjustment) and 18.7 percent for freshmen (31.8% before adjustment). As the 2025 race and ethnicity data are adjusted enrollment estimates for freshmen and for undergraduates, these results should be interpreted with caution. No adjustments are made for graduate students as their race/ethnicity Missing rate is relatively stable year-on-year (between 14.4% and 17.1% in this report, depending on the year).

Since 2020, the number of students who choose not to report an ethnoracial category to their institution ("Unknown" in this report) has grown 19.5 percent for undergraduates, while it has declined 16.3 percent for graduate students. In the last year alone, undergraduates with Unknown race/ethnicity increased 20.7 percent, and the number among freshmen is even more pronounced (up 42.0% this fall). Given the rise in this population, the Unknown category is broken out from Missing (for students whose institutions did not report any race/ethnicity data to the Clearinghouse). Additionally, any enrollment changes in other undergraduate reported ethnoracial groups should be interpreted with caution.

Neighborhood Income Measure

The neighborhood income measure provides information about the relative socioeconomic level of students' pre-college neighborhoods for students originating from the 50 U.S. states and Washington, D.C. Neighborhood income is highly correlated with other indicators of neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) such as home ownership, educational attainment, employment, and poverty. Research suggests that students hailing from higher SES neighborhoods have better outcomes in terms of college attendance and lifetime earnings, likely due to factors such as access to high-quality schools, high-achieving peer groups, healthier natural environments, and limited exposure to violence and the criminal justice system. It is important to note that this is ***not*** a measure of family or individual income. Not all students who come from high-income neighborhoods come from high-income families and the same is true of students from low-income neighborhoods.

The measure utilizes street addresses reported to the Clearinghouse with each enrollment submission to locate students' homes in a particular census tract through geocoding. To best approximate socioeconomic origins, we use the first permanent address reported to the Clearinghouse for each student and apply the measure only to undergraduate students 24 and younger whose first higher education enrollment (including dual enrollment) occurred at age 19 or younger. Additionally, a small number of students, whose first enrollment predates 2010, are excluded due to the availability of external data sources needed to construct the measure. After these three restrictions—location of the first address, age at first enrollment, and data year of the first address—are taken into account, we are able to include 92 percent of all undergraduates 24 and younger in each term.

Income data for each tract are sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates. These are adjusted using Regional Price Parity values from the Bureau of Economic Analysis to account for price level differences by state and metropolitan area. The quintiles referenced in this report are of tract median household income adjusted for household size. Quintiles are based on the national distribution of median household income, adjusted for household size, among all census tracts in the 50 states and D.C.

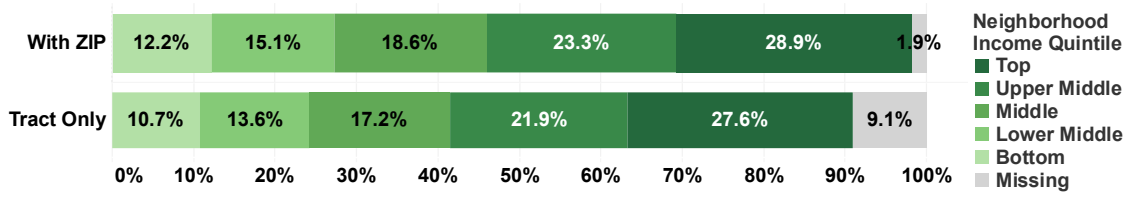
The vast majority (nearly 92%) of students included in the neighborhood income analyses in this report are successfully geocoded to a census tract. We also include an additional 5.9 to 8.1 percent (depending on the student group—undergraduates or freshmen—and the year) of students who match to ZIP codes but not tracts.[1] ZIP codes are generally larger than tracts, providing less granular measures of a student's pre-college neighborhood. To apply our tract-based neighborhood income measure to these students, we link ZIP codes to Census tracts using crosswalks produced by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). A student matching to a ZIP code is assigned weights equal to the share of all residential addresses within the ZIP code lying in tracts of each neighborhood income quintile. For each ZIP-code matched student, the sum of these weights equals 1. Specifically, a student matched to a ZIP code that overlaps with two tracts: one in the lower middle quintile and the other in the middle neighborhood income quintile, with each tract encompassing half the residential addresses in that ZIP code, would be assigned quintile values for each of those quintiles with weights equal to 0.5 for each.

Because our method assumes an equal probability of college-going from tracts of differing neighborhood income levels within the same ZIP code, we are likely slightly *over*estimating the share of students from lower-income

[1] An additional small share of students (1.2% to 2.0% depending on the year) match to a ZIP code. However, we exclude these students because their address indicates a PO Box. Since PO Boxes are delivery addresses and not necessarily residential addresses, these students appear as Missing in our neighborhood income analyses.

neighborhoods using this method. However, as shown in figure M1, given the relatively small share of students assigned to income quintiles using ZIP code matches, the distribution of students by neighborhood income quintile does not differ greatly between an approach that includes only those students who are geocoded to census tracts and the one used here incorporating ZIP code matches. Inclusion of ZIP code matches also allows us to provide information on neighborhood income background for student groups for whom tract-level geocoding is substantially less successful, such as students from rural areas.

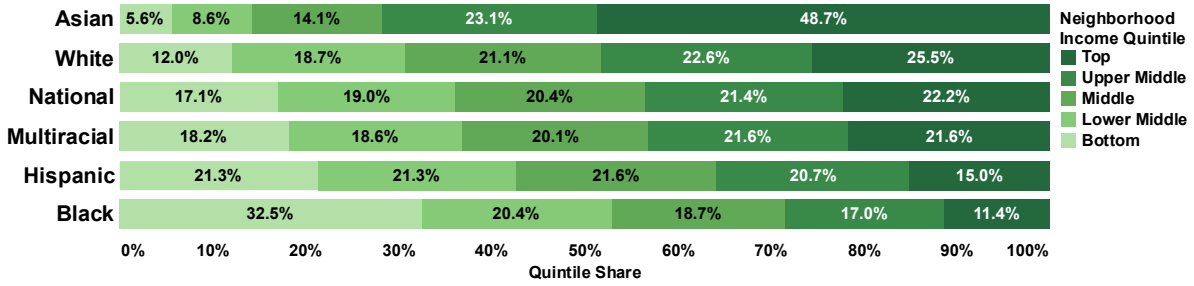
Figure M1. Comparison of Neighborhood Income Quintile Distribution for Undergraduates Using ZIP Code Matches and Tract-Only Matches, Fall 2025



In this report, students with missing neighborhood income quintile values are those who have met the sample restrictions described above, but that (1) we were unable to geocode to either a tract or a ZIP code (including all PO Box addresses) or (2) were geocoded to a tract (or a ZIP code which overlaps such a tract) for which ACS does not publicly publish income data. These missing rates range from 0.9 percent to 2.1 percent depending on the student group (undergraduates or freshmen) and the year. The inability to geocode (rather than geocoding to a tract or ZIP code without income data) accounts for nearly all of these missing cases. Geocoding non-matches typically arise from issues relating to the quality of address data such as PO Box addresses and incomplete street addresses. Address quality may be correlated with both neighborhood and household income.

For neighborhood income results by students' race/ethnicity, it is important to note that ethnoracial groups are not uniformly distributed across neighborhood income quintiles. To aid in interpreting these data, we provide a baseline estimate of the population of all 15–17-year-olds in the U.S. residing in tracts of each neighborhood income quintile for each of the race/ethnicity groups we report on, as well as for the Nation overall in figure M2.

Figure M2. National Distribution of 15–17-year-olds by Race/Ethnicity and Neighborhood Income Quintile



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2019-2023 5-year Estimates. NOTE: Age 15-17 selected to approximate high school-age and to avoid the undercounting of 18–24-year-olds living away from home while enrolled in postsecondary education. These individuals are not included in home census tract estimates.

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