

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 at the time of publication, fall 2023 IPEDS enrollments were used as the basis for calculating the Clearinghouse coverage rates for fall 2024 and fall 2025 in the *Fall 2025 Final Fall Enrollment Trends* report. To maintain consistency, these rates were also applied to estimate spring 2026 enrollment for this report. 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: IPEDS does not conduct a spring enrollment survey, so there are no comparable IPEDS numbers for the spring. For Clearinghouse reporting, institutions provide the start- and end-dates for each enrollment, rather than formally designating fall or spring terms. Spring terms included in the *Final Spring Enrollment Trends* account for the academic terms that:

- a) began between January 15 and April 5, inclusive OR
- b) ended between February 15 and April 30, inclusive OR
- c) began before January 15 AND ended after April 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 spring 2021 and the 2021 Carnegie Classification for spring 2022 to spring 2026. 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 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 spring 2021 and the 2021 Basic Classification to identify PABs for spring 2022 to spring 2026. 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 93 percent of all PAB enrollment for 2021 and about 95 percent of all PAB enrollment between spring 2022 and spring 2026. 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 spring 2021 and spring 2022. 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 spring 2021 and spring 2022 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 recent three years (2024-2026). The institution coverage of HBCUs between 2024 and 2026 is 62 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 spring 2021 and the 2021 classification for spring 2022 to spring 2026. This measure is applied only to public 2-year institutions. PABs are not “Associate Colleges” in the Carnegie classification, therefore 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.

Major Field of Study

Major fields of study across all years have been harmonized to reflect the 2020 NCES Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP). At the national level, 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.

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 "Other Graduate" 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 "Other Undergraduate" 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 between 4.5 and 5.5 percent of enrollment records included in this report depending on the year.

Gender Imputation

Institutions reported student gender to the Clearinghouse for about three-quarters 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 11.8 and 15.3 percent of undergraduates reported with race/ethnicity of Missing, across years in this report. To address this, undergraduate enrollment by race and ethnicity is estimated for the most recent year (spring 2026) based on previous years' patterns of data reporting. As the 2026 undergraduate race and ethnicity data are adjusted estimates, results should be interpreted with caution. No adjustments are made for graduate students as their race/ethnicity Missing rate is relatively stable year-over-year.

Suggested Citation

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