

Methodological Notes

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The Persistence and Retention report series examines early college enrollment outcomes for beginning postsecondary students, tracking both first spring and second-year persistence and retention rates. Students are considered persisted if they remain enrolled at any institution and retained if they remain at their starting institution—either in the spring term following initial enrollment (first spring) or in the fall of their second academic year (second fall). In both timeframes, students who complete a credential before the applicable term are also included in the corresponding rates. The report is designed to help institutions understand trends and patterns in this important early success indicator, and identify disparities by institutional type, state, degree level, starting enrollment intensity, major field, and student demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and race and ethnicity. All data for the entering fall cohorts prior to fall 2024 reflect any newer and additional data that participating institutions have reported to the National Student Clearinghouse since last year’s publication.

The report includes an interactive data dashboard to enable viewers to analyze, visualize, and interact with the longitudinal data, which are also available for download.

National Coverage of the Data

National Student Clearinghouse data track enrollments nationally and are not limited by institutional and state boundaries. As of fall 2023, institutions actively submitting enrollment data to the Clearinghouse account for over 97 percent of all enrollments at Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S.

Adjustment to Cohort Identification Methodology

Persistence and retention cohort counts and rates have been amended to provide a more accurate identification of students’ first fall enrollment record, correcting a prior error in the term-date criteria (see section “Term Definitions”, below) that excluded some valid fall entrants. This has been corrected for the current report and all affected prior cohort years. The adjustment increased national cohort counts by 5.5% on average across years. National second fall persistence and retention rates declined by an average 0.5pp after correction, while first spring persistence and retention rates declined by an average 0.4pp.

First Spring Persistence and Retention

First spring persistence and retention rates are included to provide the earliest view of

student enrollment outcomes. First spring persistence is defined as continued enrollment at any postsecondary institution in the spring term immediately following the student's first fall term, or completion of a credential before the start of the following fall term. First spring retention refers to continued enrollment at the entering institution or credential completion at the same institution by the same points in time.

Second Fall Persistence and Retention Definitions

Second fall persistence is defined as continued enrollment at any postsecondary institution in the fall term of a student's second academic year or completion of a credential at any time between the start of the first fall term and the end of the second fall term. Retention is defined as continued enrollment at the entering institution in the fall terms of a student's first and second year or completion of a credential at the same institution within that timeframe.

Term Definitions

National Student Clearinghouse data are nonadjudicated, administrative data that come directly from college and university registrars. 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.

The *Persistence and Retention* report uses these dates to identify fall and spring terms based on the following criteria:

Fall Term

A term is considered a fall term if it meets any of the following conditions:

- a. Begins between August 15 and October 31 (inclusive), OR
- b. Ends between September 15 and November 30 (inclusive), OR
- c. Begins before August 15 *and* ends after November 30

Spring Term

A term is considered a spring term if it meets any of the following conditions:

- a. Begins between January 15 and April 5 (inclusive), OR
- b. Ends between February 15 and April 30 (inclusive), OR
- c. Begins before January 15 *and* ends after April 30

First-Time Beginning Students

This report uses historical Clearinghouse enrollment and degree data to confirm that students included in the study (1) showed no previous college enrollment, (2) had not previously completed a college degree or certificate, and (3) their first-time enrollment in an applicable cohort year was not categorized as dual enrollment (that is, any enrollment prior to age 18). While this excludes current dual enrolled students from each cohort, it includes students with a history of dual enrollment, provided they meet our other criteria (namely, that they have not already earned a postsecondary credential while in high school).

Enrollment Intensity

A student is classified as having started college in a full-time status or part-time status based on their earliest reported enrollment intensity within the entering fall term. The part-time category comprises three-quarter-time, half-time and less-than-half-time students. Students with non-credential enrollments or whose program level is unknown (see following section for additional details) are included in overall persistence and retention calculations, but not in breakdowns by enrollment intensity. We report on these students in a separate category in the downloadable Data Appendix.

Degree/Certificate-Seeking Status

The report is designed to examine persistence and retention rates for undergraduate-level degree-seeking students (certificate, associate, or bachelor's degrees). While degree-seeking students make up the vast majority of the first-time postsecondary student cohort, the cohort for our analysis also includes a small number of first-time college students enrolled in non-credential programs, as well as students for whom program level information was unknown but who had valid enrollment records for the applicable entering cohort year. For a detailed breakdown of these student groups, see the data appendix.

Non-credential programs may include preparatory coursework, teacher certification, or other noncredit career and technical education (CTE) programs that may lead to an

industry certification if the student takes the certification exam. These enrollments made up 1.2 percent of the fall 2024 beginning cohort.

The circumstances behind a lack of program information (program level unknown) are institution-specific and can range from first-time students who are required to be undeclared until they declare a specific major, to non-credit students. Program level unknown enrollments made up 2.8 percent of the fall 2024 entering cohort.

Institutional Sector Classification

This report defines institution sectors primarily based on the [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: Basic Classification](#). Carnegie 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 Bacculaureate Institutions (PABs; see below). The 2015 Carnegie Classification was used to assign sectors for 2015-16 to 2017-18, the 2018 Carnegie Classification for 2018-19 to 2020-21, and the 2021 Carnegie Classification for 2021-22 to 2024-25. Where an institution's Carnegie Classification carries no information as to 2- versus 4-year status, or an institution is not included in the Carnegie Classification, IPEDS sectors are used. All sector classifications are at the main campus level, meaning branches are assigned to the sector of their main campus.

Primarily Associate Degree Granting Bacculaureate Institutions (PABs) and Classification of Institutional Sectors

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 two-year institutions as four-year institutions, since IPEDS assigns two- or four-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 bacculaureate (PAB) institutions.

We identify PABs using the [Carnegie Basic Classification](#). PABs are defined as institutions that offer at least one bacculaureate degree program and award more than half of their degrees at the associate level. These institutions are made up of two subcategories:

- Bacculaureate/Associate Colleges - Associate Dominant (codes 12-14 in the 2010 Classification, then code 14 from 2015 onward): 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.

PAB institutional control (i.e., public, private nonprofit, private for-profit) is identified using IPEDS data. In this report, we show persistence and retention rates for public PABs only. Private PABs are not reported separately but are included in overall totals. Public PABs account for approximately 93.3 percent of all PAB enrollments included in this report and have made up an increasing share of PAB enrollments over time, representing 95.4 percent of all PAB enrollments in the Fall 2024 entering cohort. 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 persistence and retention rate trends between 2017-18 and 2018-19, and between 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Race and Ethnicity

Not all institutions report race and ethnicity data to the Clearinghouse. Missing data (for institutions that do not report to the Clearinghouse) and unknown data (for students that do not report to their institution) made up 20.1 percent of the fall 2024 beginning cohort. Due to a higher missing rate, the report does not analyze race/ethnicity patterns for the private for-profit, four-year institution sector.

Gender

Gender was reported to the Clearinghouse as male or female by institutions until 2024, when “unknown” was added as a third category. Students with reported unknown gender make up 0.52 percent of the fall 2024 beginning cohort. Not all institutions report gender data to the Clearinghouse. Missing data made up 6.66 percent of the fall 2024 beginning cohort.

Institutions reported student gender to the Clearinghouse for 70 percent of the students in the 2024 cohort. The gender for an additional 23 percent of the students was 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 remaining students, approximately 7 percent of the cohort, had either missing gender data or were reported as unknown. 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 cases where gender was reported by institutions. For a detailed document describing this approach, see the “Working With Our Data” page.

Major Field

In this report, *Major Field* refers to the student's declared field of study as reported in their first fall enrollment record. Students are grouped by their initial major regardless of any subsequent changes in major field. Persistence and retention rates by major field were calculated based on institution reporting of enrollments at bachelor's degree, associate degree, and certificate program levels according to the 2020 version of the 6-digit CIP (Classification of Instructional Programs) by the National Center for Education Statistics. The results were then aggregated to the 2-digit CIP code level. Historical data presented in this report has been harmonized to reflect the 2020 CIP classifications, allowing for consistent comparisons over time.

Primarily Online Institutions (POIs) and Multi-State Institutions

Primarily Online Institutions (POIs) are identified based on the distance education survey items in the [IPEDS fall enrollment surveys](#) for each respective academic year, with the fall 2023 survey applied to the data for the fall 2023 and fall 2024 entering cohorts. 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 academic year through 2023-24. The 2023 survey was used for 2023-24 and 2024-25. 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.

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