Methodological Notes

Click here to access the full report.

Update for 2026 report: Recent database system enhancements enabled a more accurate process to link historical student enrollment and degree records leading to additional students being matched to more current degree records who were previously considered SCNC students. As a result, about 374,000 students from the 2025 report and 309,000 students from the 2024 report are no longer classified as SCNC (less than 1% of the Under 65 SCNC Population). To better provide accurate year-over-year comparisons, the data reflected in the 2024 and 2025 reports were re-analyzed to align with this database enhancement. While the numbers in this report have changed, all previously published trends and insights remain the same.

National Coverage of the Data

The National Student Clearinghouse currently collects data from more than 3,600 postsecondary institutions, representing 97.4 percent of all U.S. postsecondary enrollments at Title IV degree-granting institutions, as of 2024. Data collection began in 1993, and national coverage has been above 90 percent since 2007. However, some states and sectors have lower coverage rates, particularly in the earlier years. Historically, private for-profit coverage has been lower than that of other institution types. Details of annual data coverage rates by institution type and state are available here. Variations in coverage, particularly during the early years of the study period, may result in an underestimate of the true population of Some College, No Credential students in both national and state-level results. Further, the data may overestimate the students included in the study cohort if they earned a degree or enrolled at a non-Clearinghouse participating institution during the study period.

State Data Coverage

While institutions that currently report to the Clearinghouse reflect over 90 percent of institutions that report to the U.S. Department of Education in each state, this coverage was much lower in the earlier years of NSC data collection (refer to enrollment table for historical coverage rates). Since this lower coverage may impact the overall number of SCNC students by state, please use caution when interpreting the state shares of SCNC populations.

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SCNC STUDENT IDENTIFICATION AND STOPOUT PERIOD

SCNC Population

SCNC students identified in the Clearinghouse data as of July 2024 are those who had at least one postsecondary enrollment record after January 1, 1993 (the beginning of the Clearinghouse database), with a period of stop-out defined as having had no enrollment between January 1, 2023, and July 31, 2024 (**"the stopout period"**, which represents roughly three consecutive academic terms), and no degree or certificate awarded as of July 31, 2024. This resulted in 43.68 million students.

As Clearinghouse data do not indicate when someone has died, the size of the SCNC population over 65 in this report is an overestimate. The estimated share of the SCNC population over 65 has risen from 12.2 percent at the start of 2022-23 to 13.5 percent at the beginning of 2024-25. In order to address this issue, and to align with most state postsecondary attainment goals, which limit the population of focus to some set of working age adults, the report focuses on the SCNC population currently under age 65. The age restriction results in 37.77 million individuals under the age of 65 identified as SCNC. For the remainder of these notes, all shares of the SCNC population refer to the population under age 65.

RECENT STOPOUTS, POTENTIAL COMPLETERS AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS CACULATION

Recent Stopouts: Student identifiers were utilized to connect the SCNC population from this year's report to last year's to identify those who were not in last year's population. Based on the stopout period identified above, students who were newly identified as SCNC students (1.94 million, 5.1%) last enrolled sometime during 2022 and had no enrollment records between January 1, 2023, and July 31, 2024. For this reason, these students are referred to as "recent stopouts".

Potential Completers: A subset of SCNC individuals (2.56 million, 6.8%) were identified as being "potential completers" due to having made substantial academic progress toward a credential before stopping out. These are students who had completed the equivalent of at least two years' worth of enrollment or four 15-week semesters at full-time in the past ten years (see Academic Progress below).

Academic Progress Calculation: The report calculates the extent of academic progress a student attained prior to stopping out to determine whether they are considered a potential completer. A standardized definition of a "full-time week" (FTW) equivalent was used to create units to calculate students' accrued enrollment across institutional contexts in the past ten years. This was

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determined by crossing the number of enrolled weeks with enrollment intensity, using the following approach:

- One week enrolled at full-time enrollment equaled one full-time week (FTW) equivalent
- One week enrolled at three-quarters equaled 0.75 FTW equivalent
- One week enrolled at half-time equaled 0.5 FTW equivalent
- One week enrolled at less than half-time equaled 0.25 FTW equivalent

For the purposes of these analyses, two years' worth of progress was defined as the completion of 60 FTW equivalent enrollment, or four 15-week semesters at full-time. All enrollment records, including short terms, summer terms, concurrent enrollments, and dual enrollments were included when calculating progress by FTW equivalent. Note that this measure of academic progress is a proxy for the number of credits attempted, rather than credits completed (which is not observable in the Clearinghouse data that forms the basis of this report).

LAST ENROLLMENT

This report includes information about SCNC individuals' last postsecondary enrollment prior to stopout. This record is selected by choosing the enrollment record with the most recent term begin date for each student prior to the start of the report's stopout period. If this results in multiple records for a student, ties are resolved by prioritizing higher-intensity enrollments over lower-intensity, then enrollments in longer over shorter terms. If there are still multiple records per student, a record is chosen at random.

SUCCESS METRICS: DEFINITIONS

This report focuses on the following success metrics:

Re-Enrollment: Defined as students who hold a valid (full-time or part-time) enrollment record at least once during the academic year following a stop out of at least three consecutive terms.

First Credential: Defined as earning a credential in either the first or second academic year following a stopout of at least three consecutive terms. We report the first credential metric in three ways:

- For those who re-enrolled in the 2024-25 academic year, we look at first credentials earned in the same academic year.
- For those who re-enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year, we report on first credentials earned in the 2024-25 academic year, their second year after re-enrolling. We also discuss the cumulative two-year credential earning rate for these re-enrollees. Additional details on

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credential earning in the first year of re-enrollment for this group can be found in the previous report in this series.

- Finally, we look at credential earning after stopout without having to first re-enroll. Students in this group earn credentials more than three full terms after their last enrollment and may include students who have needed to resolve administrative barriers or have received reverse transfer awards.

Perseverance: Defined as continuing enrollment into a second academic year. Here, we report on perseverance for the cohort of SCNC students who re-enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year and continued enrollment into the 2024-25 academic year. Because members of this cohort who earned a credential in 2023-24 are no longer SCNC, our perseverance measure excludes these students.

SUCCESS RATES: CALCULATION METHODS

The calculations for the re-enrollment, first credential, perseverance, and total progression rates used in this report are outlined below. Students who earned a credential without having to first re-enroll are excluded from the first credential, perseverance, and total progression rates:

RE-ENROLLMENT RATE:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees}}{\text{Size of SCNC Population (under 65)}}$$

FIRST YEAR CREDENTIAL EARNING RATE:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees Earning a First Credential in Year One}}{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees}}$$

SECOND YEAR CREDENTIAL EARNING RATE:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees Earning a First Credential in Year Two}}{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees}}$$

PERSEVERANCE RATE:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Perseverers}}{(\text{Number of Re-Enrollees} - \text{Number of Re-Enrollees Earning a First Credential in Year One})}$$

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COMBINED TWO-YEAR CREDENTIAL EARNING RATE:

The combined two-year credential earning rate is the sum of the First Year and Second Year Credential Earning Rates.

State-Level Success Rates: For the states, the re-enrollment rate is calculated with respect to the state of last enrollment, rather than the state where re-enrollment occurred. This is because state SCNC populations are defined based on the state of last enrollment prior to stopout. The state re-enrollment rate captures the share of students last enrolled in a particular state who re-enrolled in *any* state. To provide additional aid in interpreting state re-enrollment numbers, we provide counts of re-enrollees who remain in the same state from last enrollment to re-enrollment for all states. The formula for the state re-enrollment rate is:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Re-Enrollees Last Enrolled in State X}}{\text{Size of SCNC Population (under 65) Last Enrolled in State X}}$$

If Virginia is "State X" in the formula above, then the state re-enrollment rate captures the share of SCNC students last enrolled in Virginia who re-enrolled in any state. The remaining state-level outcome rates (first credential in years one and two and perseverance) are calculated with a denominator based on the re-enrollment population *in the state of re-enrollment*. Continuing with our Virginia example, this means that the outcome rates are calculated based off of the population of all students who re-enrolled in Virginia regardless of the state in which they were last enrolled prior to stopping out.

DATA LIMITATIONS

MISSING DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

While in recent years, the data coverage rate for gender and race/ethnicity has improved, with over 96 percent of the current undergraduate population having a valid gender value, and 83 percent of the undergraduate population with a valid reported race/ethnicity, this coverage previously was low, with less than 15 percent of institutions reporting this information to the Clearinghouse as late as 2008/09 (see our Additional Data Elements for historic coverage rates). As a result, the share of SCNC students currently under 65 with missing racial/ethnic information is 59.5 percent and 8.1 percent have missing gender data. In both cases, the missing rates are higher for older enrollment data.

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Considering the much lower data coverage rate for race/ethnicity in the earlier years, throughout this report, race/ethnicity shares of the SCNC population, along with SCNC re-enrollment rates by race/ethnicity, are limited to the population of students who entered college in 2013 or later. This includes discussions of the demographic makeup of key subgroups, such as Potential Completers. This sample represents 31.3 percent of SCNC individuals under age 65, 78.4 percent of Potential Completers, and 59.8 percent of re-enrollees in the 2024-25 academic year. Race/ethnicity population shares and counts for the total population, regardless of the timing of college entry, are available in the data appendices, although these should be interpreted with caution.

When discussing outcomes *among* the set of SCNC students who re-enroll in postsecondary education (e.g. perseverance, first credential), race/ethnicity findings include all re-enrollees regardless of when they first entered college, given lower race/ethnicity missing rates among students with recent enrollment records.

DATA PRIOR TO 1993:

Since the Clearinghouse's enrollment reporting began in 1993, SCNC students who stopped out more than 25 years ago are likely to be underestimated in this report. Interpret age related findings with caution.

DUAL ENROLLMENT

NSC data include dual enrollments in college for students who are still in high school. Dual enrollments were identified by using student age at the time of enrollment (under 18) as a proxy. Additionally, students over 18 are removed as dual enrollees if their high school diploma award date is known and was later than the start of their last enrollment record prior to the start of the stopout period. Students with dual enrollments were excluded from the SCNC population only if their last enrollment record prior to the stopout period was a dual enrollment. Students whose last enrollment prior to the stopout period is a postsecondary enrollment, but who have a history of prior dual enrollment, are included in the analysis.

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AGE CALCULATION METHODS

This report defines an individual's age as follows:

- Current Age: the individual's age on July 31, 2025 (the end of the academic year studied)
- Age at Last Enrollment: the individual's age on the term begin date of their last enrollment record prior to the stopout period.
- Age at re-enrollment: the student's age on the term begin date of their first re-enrollment after stopping out. This calculation is also used to assess perseverance by age.
- Age at first credential: the student's age on the award date of the first credential.

INSTITUTION SECTOR RECLASSIFICATIONS

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 2021 Basic Classification to identify PABs. 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 beginning with the 2024 report. Enrollment at private PABs is included in totals. Public PABs account for about 97% percent of SCNC students currently under 65 last enrolled at a PAB.

The most recent institution sector designations are applied in this report regardless of applicable designations at the time a student stopped out. This enables us to analyze student pathways without the disruption of sector reclassifications from year to year.

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PRIMARILY ONLINE AND MULTI-STATE INSTITUTIONS

Primarily Online Institutions (POIs)

Beginning with its reports released in fall 2024, the Research Center began to apply a new list of POI institutions to its reports. This list lifted a restriction designed to account for institutions that temporarily would have qualified as POIs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the lifting of this restriction, the new POI list represented a large, one-year increase in the number of institutions (+22) designated as POIs. These new institutions are those that have made a more permanent shift since the COVID-19 pandemic to POI status. However, to reduce the impact of this one-time reclassification, this report continues to hold POI designations consistent from one year to the next by following the POI designations made in our 2024 report. These designations largely followed the IPEDS Fall Enrollment Distance Education survey responses. In general, institutions that reported over 90 percent of students at the primary campus enrolled exclusively in distance education prior to the pandemic are considered POIs. In addition, in this report, an institution must be present in both the 2025 and 2026 report data to be considered a POI.

There are some institutions or systems of institutions that report their online campuses as separate entities to IPEDS while combining them with offline campuses into a single reporting entity when submitting data to NSC. In these cases, the students enrolled at POIs identified in IPEDS are not accurately identified as enrolled at a POI in this report, resulting in an underestimation of POIs in our reporting. In reporting student outcomes in each state, POIs are not included in individual state counts in this report.

Multi-State Institutions

We defined multi-state institutions as those with at least one branch campus operating in a different state from the main campus as reported in the fall 2023 IPEDS Institutional Characteristics Survey data. While this designation will differ from whether the institution was multi-state or not at the time of a student's last enrollment, utilizing the current multi-state status enables more consistent year-over-year reporting.

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