

# **Some College, No Credential**

## A 2025 Snapshot for the Nation and the States



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## **SOME COLLEGE, NO CREDENTIAL**

### **A 2025 SNAPSHOT FOR THE NATION AND THE STATES**

Today, nearly 43.1 million people are stopped out of college without a credential. Of these, 37.6 million are working age adults under age 65. As states look to increase the skills of their labor forces and institutions confront changing demographic realities, re-engaging with these *Some College, No Credential* (SCNC) individuals has never been more crucial.

In this year's report—the sixth in our series on SCNC individuals and their re-engagement with postsecondary education—we provide a brief update on changes to the SCNC population between the start of the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. We also provide updates on outcomes for SCNC learners, including re-enrollment, perseverance, and first credential earning in the 2023-24 academic year. We then turn to important learnings across the last three years of reporting on this population. This includes consistent patterns in the structure of the SCNC population and their re-engagement with higher education, as well as insights gained across the last three years.

Our reporting reveals both persistent growth in the SCNC population and promising avenues for states and institutions to re-engage SCNC individuals. Both the overall SCNC population, and the working-age SCNC population (those under age 65), have increased in each of the three years. All fifty states and the District of Columbia have larger SCNC populations today than they did at the start of the 2021-22 academic year. Moreover, demographic disparities in SCNC re-engagement and outcomes have persisted even as students saw gains in key metrics such as perseverance and credential earning in 2023-24.

We have also focused attention on two important subpopulations—Potential Completers and Recent Stopouts—who re-engage with higher education at higher rates. Potential Completers have already completed two academic years of full-time equivalent enrollment in the last decade. Recent Stopouts were last enrolled four to five academic terms prior to the start of an academic year. In addition, we have highlighted a third group of SCNC students: those who earn credentials without having to re-enroll. This year, we highlight how this set of students reflect—in part—positive advances toward awarding credentials to SCNC students for academic progress they have already completed.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The SCNC population is 43.1 million as of the start of the 2023-24 academic year. The working age SCNC population currently under 65 comprises 37.6 million people, an increase of 2.2 percent from the start of the prior academic year.
- The number of students stopping out from higher education declined for the second year in a row, and the number of SCNC students re-enrolling in postsecondary education increased for the second year in a row. However, the SCNC population still grew as the 2.1 million students who were newly stopped out between January 2022 and July 2023 far outpaced SCNC re-enrollment in the 2022-23 academic year and the number of individuals aging out of the working age SCNC population.
- All institution sectors saw fewer stopouts between January 2022 and July 2023 compared to the same period starting a year prior, except for private for-profit four-year institutions and primarily online institutions.
- All states saw increases in the size of their SCNC populations, while 42 states and the District of Columbia saw increases in SCNC re-enrollment in 2023-24 compared to the previous year.
- Nationally, the share of re-enrollees earning a credential in their first year of re-enrollment ticked up to 4.7 percent (+0.3pp).
- Despite persistent disparities in SCNC outcomes by race/ethnicity, all groups saw some gains in re-enrollment, perseverance, or credential earning over the past three years.
- Potential Completers—students with at least two years of full-time equivalent enrollment prior to stopping out—are more likely to re-enroll, earn a credential in their first year back, persevere into a second year of re-enrollment, and complete a credential in their second year.
- Community colleges and primarily online institutions stand out for the outsized role they play in SCNC dynamics. Community colleges are both the major source of stopout and the primary destination for returning SCNC students. Primarily online institutions account for a disproportionately high share of re-enrollees compared to the share of SCNC individuals who last attended these institutions.
- Each year, about 1 in 4 SCNC credential earners earn a credential without having to re-enroll. While our data does not identify causes, these completers may be the beneficiaries of policies that remove administrative barriers to completion or award credentials based on the number of credits already earned in the past.

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## REPORT OVERVIEW

Throughout this report, we break down the SCNC population into two subgroups. To be considered SCNC, a person must have been stopped out for at least three terms prior to the start of the academic year. Unless otherwise noted we focus on the SCNC population between the ages of 18 and 64 years old:

1. *Potential Completers*: Students with at least two years of full-time equivalent enrollment in the last decade. For example, individuals are considered Potential Completers if they were enrolled for at least two years sometime after 2013. As of this year, Potential Completers comprise 7.2 percent (2,696,000 individuals) of the SCNC population. Individuals in this group are called Potential Completers because the combination of credits accumulated and the relative recency of their prior enrollment makes them the most likely to be able to complete a degree or other credential.
2. *Recent Stopouts*: Students who were newly identified as SCNC this year, having been stopped out between January 2022 and July 2023. These Recent Stopouts last enrolled sometime in the 2021 calendar year and make up 5.6 percent of the SCNC population (2,110,000 individuals) in this report.

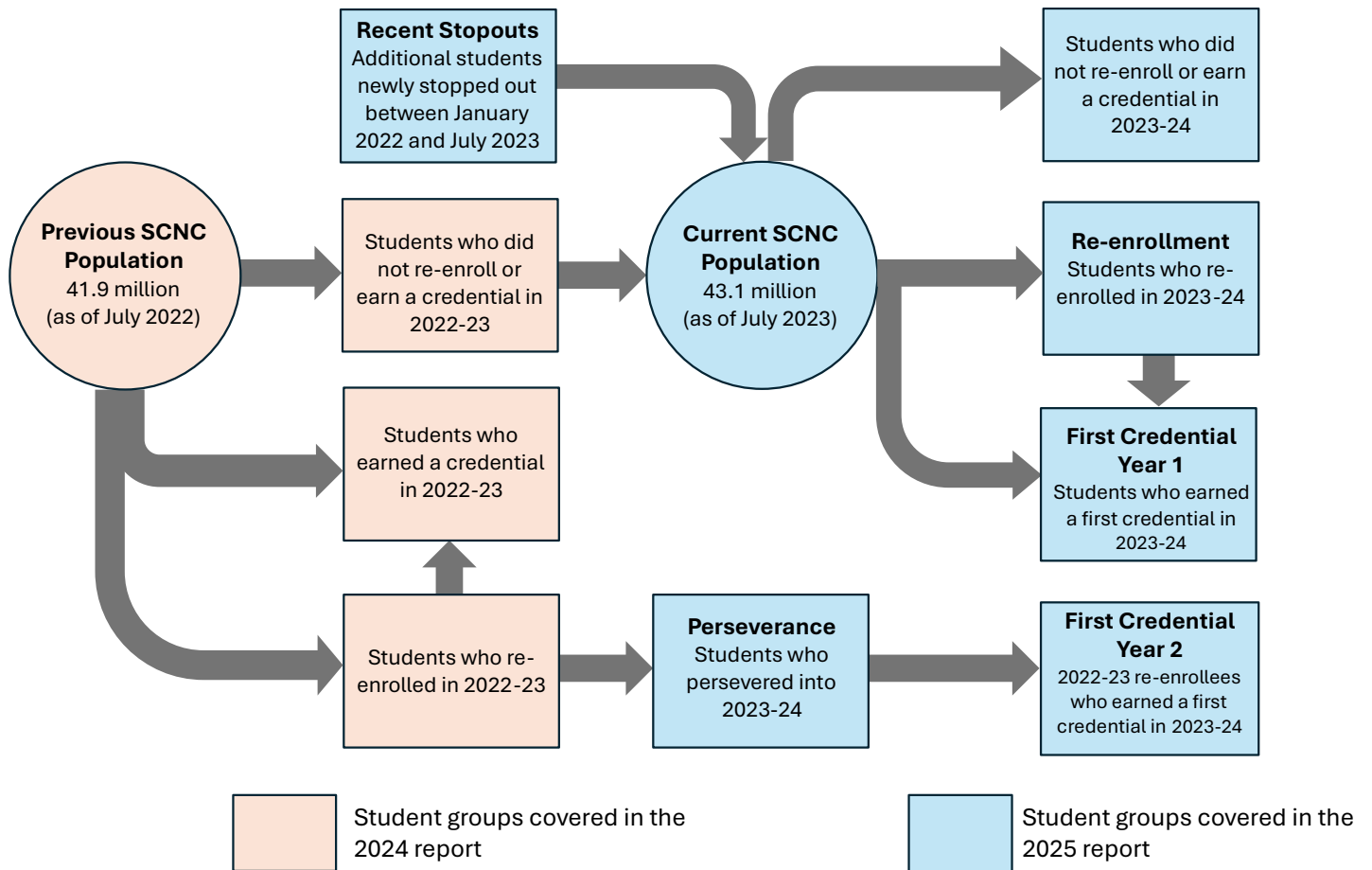
We use the following metrics to assess the progress and performance of these student groups:

1. *Re-Enrollment*: Defined as enrolling (part-time or full-time) at least once during the 2023-24 academic year.
2. *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 on the first credential metric in three ways:
  - For those who re-enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year, we look at first credentials earned in the same academic year ("first year credential earning").
  - For those who re-enrolled in the 2022-23 academic year, we report on first credentials earned in the 2023-24 academic year, their second year after re-enrolling ("second year credential earning"). We also discuss the combined two-year credential earning rate for these re-enrollees. We initially reported on their first year credential earning in the previous report in this series.
  - We also 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.
3. *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 2022-23 academic year and continued enrollment into the 2023-24 academic year. Because members of this cohort who earned a credential in 2022-23 are no longer SCNC, our perseverance measure excludes these students.

The flow chart below (Figure 1) demonstrates the process by which the SCNC population changes and how we cover these changes and student outcomes through this report series. The chart shows that most of the students in the SCNC population for this report were also in the SCNC population in the previous report, meaning that they did not re-enroll or earn a credential in the intervening year. New students become SCNC when they experience a stopout lasting at least three terms. Once part of the SCNC population, there are three potential pathways:

1. Remaining unenrolled in college and therefore continuing to be SCNC
2. Re-enrolling in college
3. Earning a degree or other credential

**Figure 1. Flow Diagram of the SCNC Population**



## 1. AN SCNC POPULATION UPDATE FOR THE 2023-24 ACADEMIC YEAR

This section provides insights into the SCNC population at the start of the 2023-24 academic year, with a focus on how the population changed since the start of the prior year.

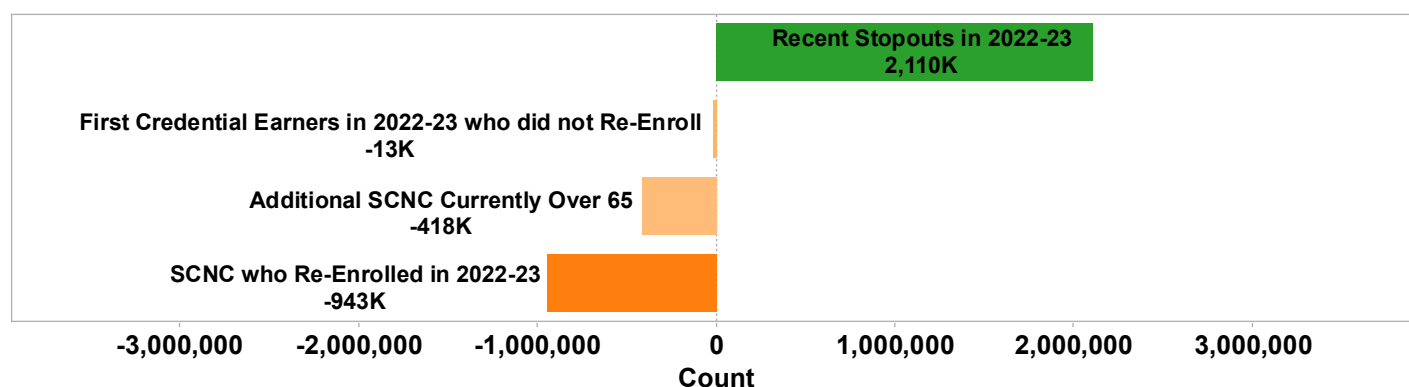
The national SCNC population stood at 43.1 million at the start of the 2023-24 academic year. The population under 65 comprised 37.6 million people, an increase of 2.2 percent from the start of the prior academic year. The SCNC population increased in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The SCNC population now stands at 43.1 million individuals across all ages. This report focuses on the working age SCNC population, those under 65, to highlight the population most likely to re-engage with higher education and to align with many state higher education attainment goals which focus on working age adults.<sup>1</sup> This population currently stands at 37.6 million as of July 31, 2023, an increase of 799,000 (+2.2%) compared with the beginning of the 2022-23 academic year. This increase was smaller than that seen between the start of the 2021-22 and the 2022-23 academic years (+1 million, +2.9%). All 50 states and the District of Columbia saw increases in the SCNC population under 65 between July 2022 and July 2023.

The number of Recent Stopouts declined for the second year in a row. However, the 2.1 million students who were newly stopped out between January 2022 and July 2023 far outpaced SCNC re-enrollment in the 2022-23 academic year and the number of individuals aging out of the working age SCNC population.

Slightly more than 2.1 million people stopped out of higher education in the period from January 1, 2022, to July 31, 2023. This represents about 156,000 fewer (-6.9%) Recent Stopouts, compared to the same period starting a year prior. Despite this decline, the number of Recent Stopouts was still high enough to offset the two factors that could lead to a decline in the working-age SCNC population: (1) individuals re-engaging with higher education through re-enrollment and credential earning, and (2) individuals aging out of the working-age SCNC population when they reach the age of 65. In comparison to the 2.1 million Recent Stopouts, there were only 956,000 SCNC individuals who either re-enrolled or earned a credential in the 2022-23 school year and an additional 418,000 SCNC individuals who aged out of the population between July 2022 and July 2023 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Number of Individuals Entering (Recent Stopouts) and Exiting the SCNC Population by Exit Reason, July 2022 to July 2023**



<sup>1</sup> This limitation also helps us to address the fact that we are unable to observe when individuals exit the SCNC population due to death, since deaths will occur at higher rates in the population 65 and older.

All institution sectors saw declines in Recent Stopouts between January 2022 and July 2023 except for private for-profit four-year institutions and primarily online institutions.

As with the three-semester stopout period prior to the 2022-23 academic year, the decline in Recent Stopouts in the same period leading up to the 2023-24 year was driven by fewer students stopping out from community colleges (Public two-year: -129,000, -10.7%; Public PAB: -19,000, -8.0%; Figure 3). However, unlike that prior period, the period leading up to 2023-24 also saw declines in Recent Stopouts from public and private nonprofit four-year institutions as well.

Figure 3. Number and Percent Change of Recent Stopouts by Sector of Last Enrollment



Note: Public and private PAB institutions are combined in this figure since they were not broken out until the 2024 report in this series (covering the stopout period spanning 2021-22).

These declines in Recent Stopouts mirror COVID-19 enrollment trends more broadly. Recent Stopouts leading into the 2022-23 school year (first reported on in our 2024 report) would have last enrolled sometime in the 2020 calendar year, while those leading into the 2023-24 school year would have last enrolled in the 2021 calendar year. While community college enrollment began a large contraction almost immediately in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, fall 2020 undergraduate enrollment losses at public and private nonprofit institutions were more muted. However, by fall 2021, these four-year institutions had seen three straight terms of undergraduate enrollment declines, leading to [203,000 fewer students enrolled in fall 2021 than in fall 2019](#).

## 2. SCNC OUTCOMES IN THE 2023-24 ACADEMIC YEAR: RE-ENROLLMENT, PERSEVERANCE, AND FIRST CREDENTIAL

This section highlights outcomes for SCNC individuals, measuring whether and how they re-engaged with higher education. The outcomes include re-enrollment and first credential earning in the 2023-24 academic year. It also looks at perseverance and first credentials earned in the second year after re-enrollment for SCNC students who re-enrolled in the 2022-23 academic year.



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More than 1 million SCNC students re-enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year, 66,000 more (+7.0%) than the previous year. The re-enrollment rate ticked up to 2.7 percent (+0.1pp).

More than one million SCNC students re-enrolled during the 2023-24 academic year, an increase of 7.0 percent (+66,000) compared to the number of re-enrollees during the 2022-23 academic year. While the increasing number of students re-engaging with postsecondary education is promising, the re-enrollment rate of 2.7 percent was barely higher than for the prior year (+0.1pp).

At the state level, 42 states and the District of Columbia saw increasing numbers of SCNC students re-enrolling in 2023-24 compared to the previous academic year.

Even as the SCNC population increased in all states between the start of the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years, 42 states and the District of Columbia saw increases in re-enrollment in 2023-24 compared to the previous year, ranging from a 0.7 percent increase in Washington, DC, to a 35.2 percent increase in Massachusetts. Among the eight states where re-enrollment declined, Louisiana and Wyoming saw relatively small drops of 0.2 percent, while Oklahoma had the largest decline (-13.8%). Utah had the highest re-enrollment rate (4.0%), while Oregon had the lowest (1.8%).

The share of re-enrollees earning a credential in their first year of re-enrollment ticked up to 4.7 percent (+0.3pp). Despite a 2.1pp increase in the perseverance rate, the combined two-year credential earning rate for re-enrollees in 2022-23 rose only slightly to 14.1 percent from the previous year (+0.2pp).

Of the more than one million 2023-24 re-enrollees, 47,000 of them earned their first credential in the same year. This represents approximately 5,000 more first year first credential earners than for re-enrollees in 2022-23. The first year credential earning rate of 4.7 percent was slightly higher than for re-enrollees in the prior year (+0.3pp).

For re-enrollees in 2022-23, the perseverance rate ticked up, while the combined two-year credential earning rate increased slightly. Of the 901,000 SCNC students who re-enrolled in the 2022-23 school year and did not earn a credential in that year, 529,000 or 58.7 percent returned in 2023-24. This represents a slight increase in the perseverance rate (+2.1pp) compared to SCNC re-enrollees in the 2021-22 academic year.

However, increasing perseverance did not lead to a comparable increase in the combined two-year credential rate. In addition to the 42,000 re-enrollees in 2022-23 who earned a first credential in their first year of re-enrollment, an additional 91,000 earned their first credential in 2023-24, for a two-year credential earning rate of 14.1 percent (compared to 13.9% for 2021-22 re-enrollees).

### **3. FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS FROM THREE YEARS OF SCNC REPORTING**

This section steps back from our year-over-year tracking of the SCNC population and re-engagement outcomes to highlight two items: (1) important regularities and trends across the last three years of our SCNC reporting and (2) insights gained from studying this population.

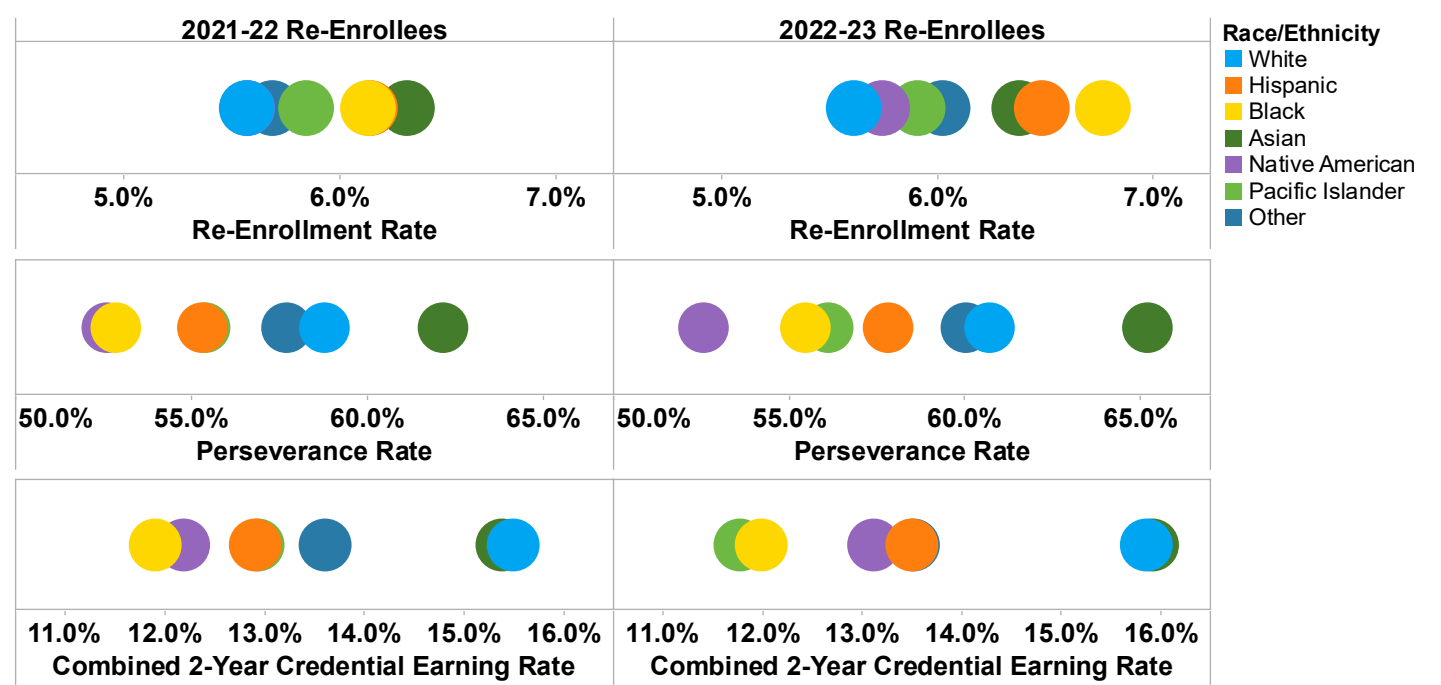
#### ***SCNC Re-Engagement and Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity and Gender***

White and Asian students make up smaller shares of the SCNC population than the current undergraduate population. The SCNC population is also more male. Despite this, White and Asian students earn credentials at higher rates than SCNC re-enrollees of other race/ethnicity backgrounds. Gender gaps are evident at re-enrollment.

Hispanic, Black, and Native American students comprise higher shares of the SCNC population than the current undergraduate population (Hispanic: 24.9% vs. 22.1%, Black: 18.8% vs. 14.3%, and Native American: 1.4% vs. 0.9%).<sup>2</sup> This remains true even as the undergraduate population has become less White over the last three years (2021-22: 51.1%, 2023-24: 48.6%). The SCNC population is also more male than the undergraduate population. In 2023-24, 51.2 percent of SCNC individuals were male, compared to 42.4 percent of undergraduates. These patterns are driven by higher stopout rates for Hispanic, Black, Native, and Pacific Islander students and for men. [Six years after first enrolling in higher education, higher shares of students from these groups are stopped out without a credential than are their White, Asian, or female peers.](#)

As we highlighted in our reporting last year, advantages for White and Asian SCNC students begin *after* re-enrollment. Black and Hispanic SCNC students re-enroll at comparable or higher rates (in 2023-24, Black: 7.2%, Hispanic: 6.5%) than their White (5.6%) and Asian (6.4%) peers. However, White and Asian re-enrollees earn credentials and persevere into a second year of enrollment at higher rates (Figure 4). These patterns hold across the last three years.

**Figure 4. Re-Enrollment, Perseverance, and Combined Two-Year Credential Earning Rates for 2021-22 and 2022-23 Re-Enrollees by Race/Ethnicity**



<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report, race/ethnicity shares of the SCNC population, along with re-enrollment rates by race/ethnicity, are limited to the population of students who entered college in 2013 or later, due to high missingness for race/ethnicity data prior to this point. When discussing outcomes among the set of SCNC students who re-enroll in postsecondary education (e.g. their perseverance and credential-earning rates), race/ethnicity findings include all re-enrollees regardless of when they first entered college. Race/ethnicity and gender shares also exclude those individuals with unknown and missing values for ease of comparison. Full results that include race/ethnicity population counts and shares for the total population, regardless of the timing of college entry, along with missing and unknown values are available in the data appendices. For further information about the race/ethnicity and gender variables, please see the Methodological Notes.

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In contrast, disparities in SCNC re-engagement by gender begin at re-enrollment, with more women than men returning to higher education initially. In 2022-23, 534,000 women re-enrolled compared to 381,000 men. The advantage disappears in credential earning, however, where men have a slightly higher two-year credential earning rate than women (14.3% vs. 13.9%). The larger number of women re-enrolling, however, results in women comprising the majority (56.0%) of credential earners after two years.

**Despite persistent disparities in SCNC outcomes by race and ethnicity, all groups saw some gains in re-enrollment, perseverance, and credential earning over the past three years.**

Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander students all saw re-enrollment rates in 2023-24 that were above those in 2021-22. Additionally, re-enrollees in 2022-23 saw perseverance rates rise across race/ethnicity groups compared to 2021-22 re-enrollees, except for Native American re-enrollees, who saw a very slight (-0.1 pp) decline in the rate even as more students persevered (Figure 4). However, Native American students who persevered into 2023-24 earned a second year credential at higher rates than those who persevered into 2022-23, leading the combined two-year credential earning rate for Native American re-enrollees to rise to 13.1 percent (+0.9pp). All groups saw the total number of credentials awarded to SCNC students (in either the first or second year of re-enrollment) rise in 2023-24.

### ***Potential Completers and Their Advantages***

After two years, 22 percent of Potential Completer re-enrollees earned a first credential compared to 12.2 percent of Non-Potential Completer re-enrollees. A higher share of Potential Completer credential-earners received bachelor's and associate degrees compared to Non-Potential Completers.

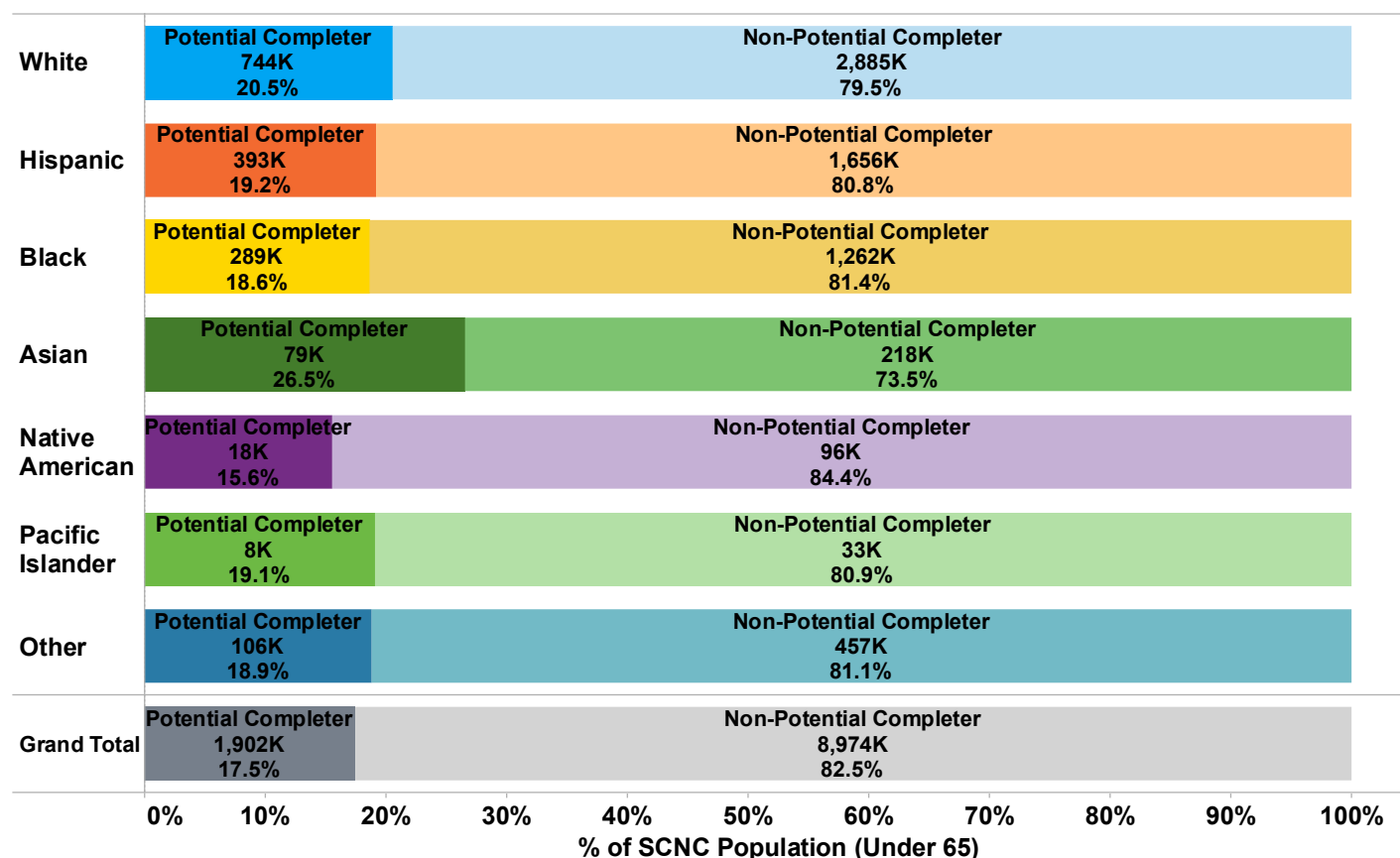
Potential Completers— with at least two years of full-time equivalent enrollment in the last decade—comprise an average of 7.5 percent of the SCNC population across the last three years. These students are younger than the SCNC population, with about 80 percent of Potential Completers under age 35, compared to only a little more than one-third of the entire SCNC population.

Among Potential Completers who entered college in 2013 or later (70.6% of all Potential Completers at the start of 2023-24), the population is slightly more White and Asian than the SCNC population (Potential Completers: 45.5% White and 4.8% Asian; All SCNC: 44.0% White and 3.6% Asian). However, among all race/ethnicity groups there is a strong share of Potential Completers, ranging from 15.6 percent for Native American to 26.5 percent for Asian SCNC individuals (Figure 5).<sup>3</sup>

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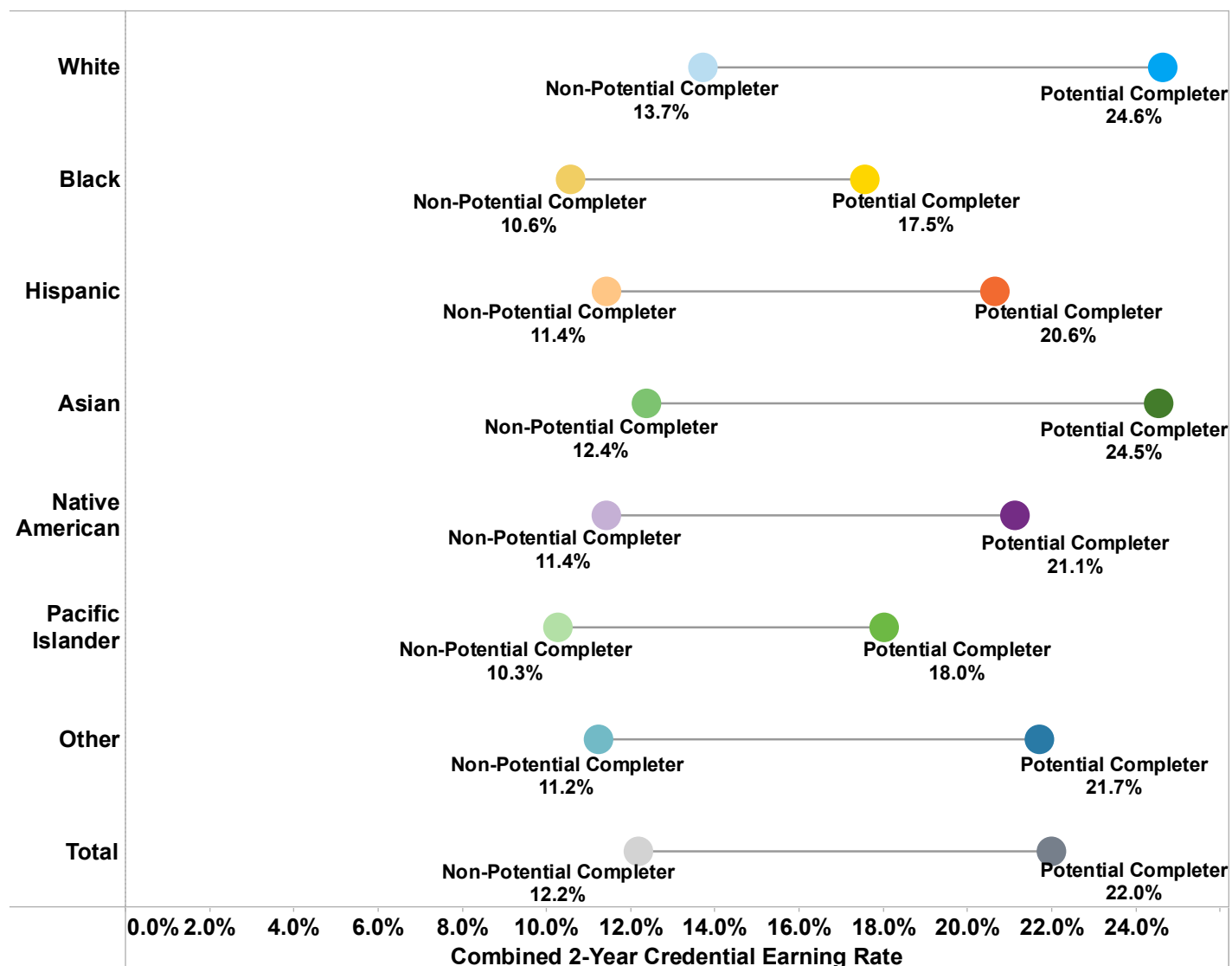
<sup>3</sup> The share of Potential Completers is higher among the population entering college in 2013 or later than it is among the full SCNC population (17.5% and 7.5%, respectively), because, by definition, Potential Completers in the most recent year must have at least two years' worth of full-time equivalent enrollment in the period from 2013 on. The population entering in 2013 or later comprises a large share of the Potential Completer population (70%). However, it comprises only 29% of the total SCNC population (10.9 of 37.6 million) in the most recent year. As a result, nearly all the population that entered college prior to 2013 (97%) is Non-Potential Completers.

**Figure 5. Share of SCNC Population (Entering 2013 or Later) by Race/Ethnicity and Potential Completer Status**



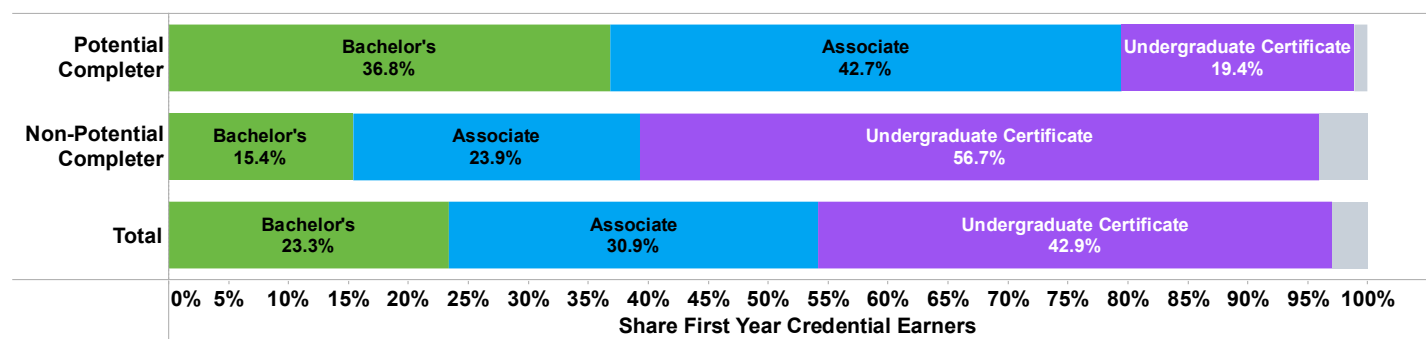
The Potential Completer advantage in earning credentials is seen at each step of the process. Potential Completers are more likely to re-engage with higher education in the first place. They re-enroll at rates three or more times higher than their Non-Potential Completer peers (7.2% vs. 2.3% in 2023-24). Once re-enrolled, they earn credentials in their first year at rates more than two times their Non-Potential Completer peers (8.4% vs. 3.8%). Those who don't earn credentials in their first year also persevere into and earn credentials during their second year at higher rates than peers with less academic experience prior to stopout (Perseverance: 61.7% vs. 58.0%; Second Year First Credential Rate: 13.8% vs. 8.6%). These advantages build on each other, so that after two years 30 percent of credential earners are Potential Completers, even though they represent only 7.5 percent of the SCNC population. After two years, 22 percent of Potential Completer re-enrollees have earned a first credential compared to 12.2 percent of Non-Potential Completer re-enrollees. Importantly, large Potential Completer advantages in credential-earning among re-enrollees can be seen across race/ethnicity groups (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Combined Two-Year Credential Earning Rate for 2022-23 Re-Enrollees by Race/Ethnicity and Potential Completer Status**



The types of credentials that Potential Completers earn also differ from their other SCNC peers. Among Non-Potential Completer re-enrollees, undergraduate certificates are the most common form of credential earned among first year credential earners, with over half (56.7%) earning a certificate. In contrast, most Potential Completer re-enrollees who earn an award in the first year of re-enrollment earn bachelor's (36.8%) or associate (42.7%) degrees (Figure 7). In large part, this reflects the fact that Potential Completers have completed the equivalent of two years of full-time enrollment prior to stopping out and are therefore likely to be further along the path to earning these degrees, in terms of credit accumulated, than their Non-Potential Completer peers. It may also reflect, however, differences in preferences and educational strategies between Potential Completers and Non-Potential Completers. This trend toward shorter-term certificates has been evident among all undergraduate credential earners, with [the number of undergraduate certificate earners growing 34.7 percent in the last decade](#).

Figure 7. Share of 2023-24 First Year Credential Earners by Potential Completer Status and Credential Type



Note: The gray portions of the bars in this figure represent completers earning other credentials.

Pathways from Last Enrollment to Re-Engagement

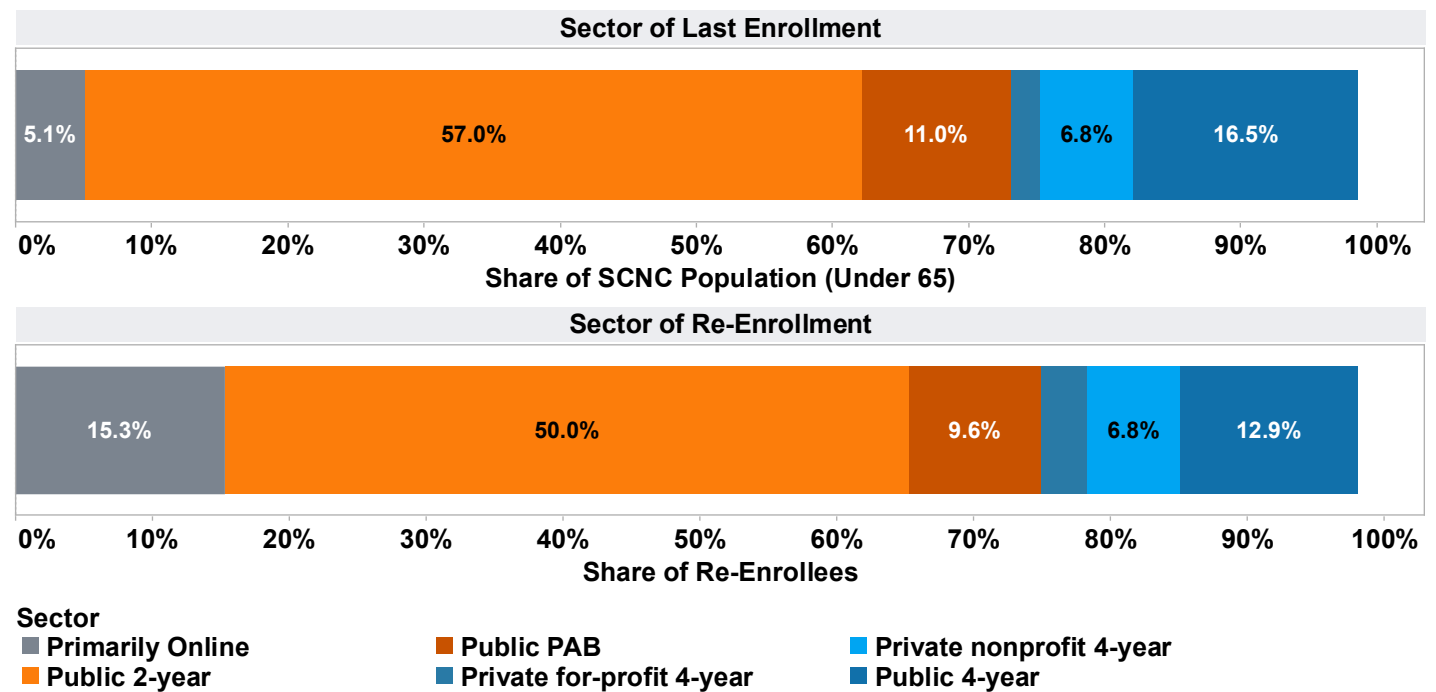
Most SCNC students return to a different institution than the one from which they last stopped out. Recent Stopouts and Potential Completers, however, are more likely than the overall SCNC population to return to their last enrolled institution.

Each year, Recent Stopout re-enrollees are the most likely to return to the institution they last attended. A majority of Recent Stopout re-enrollees in the previous two years and just under half (49.3%) in 2023-24 returned to the same institution. Potential Completers are also more likely to remain at the same institution (43.9%) than SCNC re-enrollees overall. Among all re-enrollees, only 36.1 percent return to the same institution from which they last stopped out. For those who do switch institutions, most switch to an institution in a different sector (66.7%) from the institution of their last enrollment. Of the students switching institutions, nearly a third (32.1%) move from one community college (public two-year and PAB institutions) to another, and slightly more than one in ten (11.6%) switch from a community college to a primarily online institution.

Two sectors stand out for the outsized role they play in SCNC dynamics. Community colleges are both the major source of stopouts and the primary destination for returning SCNC students. Primarily online institutions (POIs) account for a disproportionately high share of re-enrollees.

Two-thirds of SCNC individuals last attended a community college (either a public two-year or PAB institution). These institutions regularly have [completion](#) and [first year persistence](#) rates below the national average. Moreover, nearly three in five returning SCNC students re-enroll at a community college. About three-quarters (75.3% in 2023-24) of all re-enrollees who returned to the same school returned to the same community college. Meanwhile, only about 5 percent of SCNC individuals last stopped out from a POI. However, POIs account for roughly 15 percent of all re-enrollments (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Share of SCNC Population by Sector of Last Enrollment and Re-Enrollees by Sector of Re-Enrollment



Community colleges and POIs also have among the lowest rates of credential-earning among re-enrollees (Two-year credential earning rate for 2022-23 re-enrollees at POIs: 11.9%, Public PABs: 12.0%, Public two-years: 13.5%, compared to non-POI four-year institutions which range from 14.4% to 15.9%). Some of this may reflect the role that community colleges play in the higher education ecosystem, with some students enrolling without the intention of earning a credential. However, the outsized role that community colleges and POIs play in the SCNC population and re-enrollment has received relatively little attention in developing policy interventions to re-engage SCNC individuals. Ideas like Reverse Transfer and awarding associate degrees to learners stopped out from four-year institutions are crucial efforts, but they do little to address those who move between community colleges or into (often private) POIs.

Credentials Without Re-Enrolling

Each year, approximately one-quarter of SCNC credential earners receive a credential without having to re-enroll.

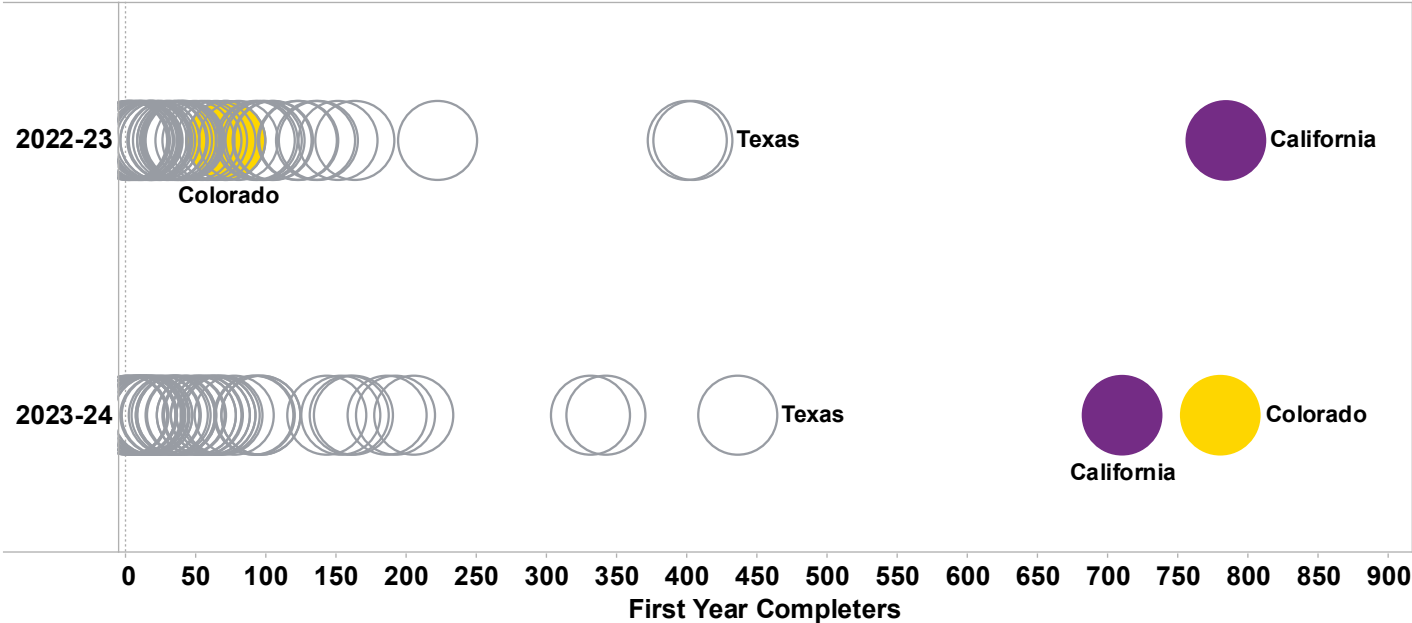
Beginning with our 2024 report, we reported on an additional group of students: SCNC individuals who earn a credential without ever re-enrolling. Over the past three years, these students—who earn credentials three academic terms or more after their last enrollment—have accounted for roughly a quarter of SCNC students who earn their first credential (15,000 of 62,000 in 2023-24).

While our data cannot explicitly identify how students earn these credentials without having to re-enroll, the pattern may be the result of several factors. First, delayed credentials could be related to institutional barriers to graduation such as required forms and fees. Once a learner completes these administrative requirements, their credential is awarded without the learner needing to re-enroll. Second, the rise of delayed credentials could also be due to academic accommodations, such as extended course incompletes. These might be utilized in response to health crises or other shocks to students’ personal lives, or to external events such as pandemics and natural disasters.

They may also be the result of concerted policies to award credentials to individuals who have already completed the required number of credits to receive a degree. These include Reverse Transfer programs, in which community colleges award associate degrees to individuals who transferred without one and subsequently completed the required credit

hours at their new institution. In this year’s data, we can also identify the result of a newer policy initiative: associate degrees awarded by four-year institutions to students who stopped out short of a bachelor’s degree but completed sufficient credit hours for an associate degree. Colorado stands out on this front, because of its new [Colorado Re-Engaged \(CORE\)](#) initiative, which allows public four-year institutions to award associate degrees to those who stopped out in the last decade with 70 credit hours under their belt. In fact, despite having the twentieth-largest SCNC population, Colorado had the seventh-highest number of completers this year (2,100, +1,200 from 2022-23), boosted by associate degrees earned by SCNC individuals who did not need to re-enroll (800, +700 from 2022-23, Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Number of Associate Degree Earners who Did Not Re-Enroll by State**





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## CONCLUSION

Over one million *Some College, No Credential* students returned to higher education in 2023-24. This re-engagement is positive, but it represents a relatively small share—less than 3 percent—of the tens of millions of working age SCNC adults. Even as fewer students are stopping out year over year, this level of re-engagement is not enough to stem the growth of the SCNC population, which has risen in all 50 states and the District of Columbia over the last three years.

Efforts to address the size of the SCNC population start before students become SCNC. While national college completion rates [have reached a 12-year high](#), there are still large differences in completion rates based on factors such as enrollment intensity, institutional sector, and student demographics. As we have noted, these differences shape the nature of the SCNC population, driving demographic differences compared to the undergraduate population overall.

Once stopped out, we have shown the promise of two subsets of the SCNC population that offer areas of focus for those interested in re-engaging SCNC individuals: Recent Stopouts and Potential Completers. Recent Stopouts are much more likely to re-enroll than students who have been stopped out for a longer period. Potential Completers have very strong advantages in re-enrollment and earning credentials. Both groups suggest that re-engagement is most successfully accomplished with SCNC individuals with recent enrollment histories. Our findings on the interactions of student pathways and demographics, more broadly, can help institutions and policymakers to better target their efforts to encourage and support those who wish to re-engage with their plans for postsecondary attainment.

Finally, institutions and states have already begun the work of recognizing that re-engagement does not always start with re-enrollment, through programs that can award credentials to SCNC students for work already completed. These programs are a positive way to address the SCNC population and raise population attainment levels. Institutions could also award these credentials as soon as learners earn sufficient credits, rather than after a student has already stopped out. Future research should investigate whether the learners who are beneficiaries of such programs—whether after stopout or while still enrolled—are more or less likely to continue their enrollment and, perhaps, achieve the goals they had initially set out to attain, sometimes years earlier. A first credential need not be the end of a student's higher education journey.

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## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

### NATIONAL COVERAGE OF THE DATA

The National Student Clearinghouse currently collects data from more than 3,600 postsecondary institutions, representing 97 percent of all U.S. postsecondary enrollments at Title IV degree-granting institutions, as of 2022. 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.

### SCNC STUDENT IDENTIFICATION AND STOPOUT PERIOD

**SCNC Population:** SCNC students identified in the Clearinghouse data as of July 2023 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, 2022, and July 31, 2023 (“the stopout period”, which represents roughly three consecutive academic terms), and no degree or certificate awarded as of July 31, 2023. This resulted in 43.1 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 11.4 percent at the start of 2021-22 to 12.7 percent at the beginning of 2023-24. 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 37.6 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 CALCULATION

**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 (2.1 million, 5.6%) last enrolled sometime during 2021 and had no enrollment records between January 1, 2022, and July 31, 2023. For this reason, these students are referred to as Recent Stopouts.

**Potential Completers:** A subset of SCNC individuals (2.7 million, 7.2%) 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).

**Update for the 2025 report:** The report previously duplicated credits earned prior to turning 18 towards the potential completer calculation. This has been corrected for this year’s report for the current year and all prior years where potential completer information was reported, beginning with the 2023 report. This adjustment did not impact any findings regarding potential completer outcomes, with estimated success rates for potential completers shifting by no more than 0.2 percentage points (pp). It did result in a 2.5 percent and 2.7 percent reduction in the number of potential completers in the SCNC population in the 2023 and 2024 reports, respectively. The estimated share of potential completers in the SCNC population under 65 in the 2023 and 2024 reports shifted by 0.2pp.

**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 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 2023-24 academic year, we look at first credentials earned in the same academic year.
- For those who re-enrolled in the 2022-23 academic year, we report on first credentials earned in the 2023-24 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 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 2022-23

academic year and continued enrollment into the 2023-24 academic year. Because members of this cohort who earned a credential in 2022-23 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:

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

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,

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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.

### **DUAL ENROLLMENTS**

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.

### **AGE CALCULATION METHODS**

This report defines an individual's age as follows:

- Current Age: the individual's age on July 31, 2024 (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.

### **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 2024 and 2025 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 2022 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. The 2022 IPEDS Institutional Classification was applied to the report for the first time this year, this change resulted in fewer multi-state institutions than in the prior year (149 versus 173). As a result, there was a large decline (-10.9%) in the SCNC population under 65 last enrolled at (non-POI) multi-state institutions in this year's report. (Multi-state institutions that are also POIs are classified as POIs). Because many of these former multi-state institutions now have only a single campus in one state, SCNC population growth in some states is larger than it otherwise would have been without the multi-state classification change. Five states have one-year SCNC population growth that is more than 0.5 percentage points higher than it would have been without the multi-state re-classification: Michigan, Nevada, Vermont, Virginia, and Wyoming. Even without the multi-state update, no state would have seen a decline in its SCNC population year over year.

### **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.

## 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 61.3 percent and 9.1 percent have missing gender data. In both cases, the missing rates are higher for older enrollment data.

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 28.9 percent of SCNC individuals under age 65, 70.6 percent of Potential Completers, and 56.4 percent of re-enrollees in the 2023-24 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.

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