

## Methodological Notes

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The *Time to Degree* report looks at students who earned an undergraduate credential during the 2024-25 academic year. From there, the report investigates their enrollment history to calculate how long it took for the student to earn that credential.

### Academic Year

An academic year is defined as an undergraduate credential conferred between July 1<sup>st</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup> of the following year. For most of this report, this will focus on students who earned a credential between July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, and June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

### Credential Earners

Two types of credential earners are presented for analysis:

- Students who earned their first-ever undergraduate credential (i.e. associate, bachelor's, or undergraduate certificate) during the academic year analyzed.
- Students who earned their first bachelor's degree during the academic year analyzed but earned either an associate or undergraduate certificate prior to earning their bachelor's degree.

Most of the report and the dashboard figures focus on students who earned their *first-ever* degree. For a small subset of analyses (e.g. students who *Transfer from a Community College*, or students who earned a *Prior Award*, all bachelor earners are included within the analysis.

## Time to Degree:

### Elapsed Time to Degree

Time elapsed is defined as the total time, in calendar years, between the date of initial enrollment in a postsecondary institution and the date of degree attainment, regardless of whether the student was enrolled in a post-secondary institution.

### Definition of “Stopout”

A discrete “stop-out” is defined as a period of time longer than 123 days between one enrollment and a subsequent enrollment, based on the term begin and end dates for those records. The “123 days” decision rule is intended to account any enrollment lapse longer than the length of a summer break (May through August) in traditional academic calendars and thus may not account for the true stop-outs for students attending institutions with non-traditional academic calendar. The total length of stopouts is the cumulative length across all stopouts, calculated based on the term begin and end dates in each student’s enrollment records in the NSC data.

### Active Enrolled Time

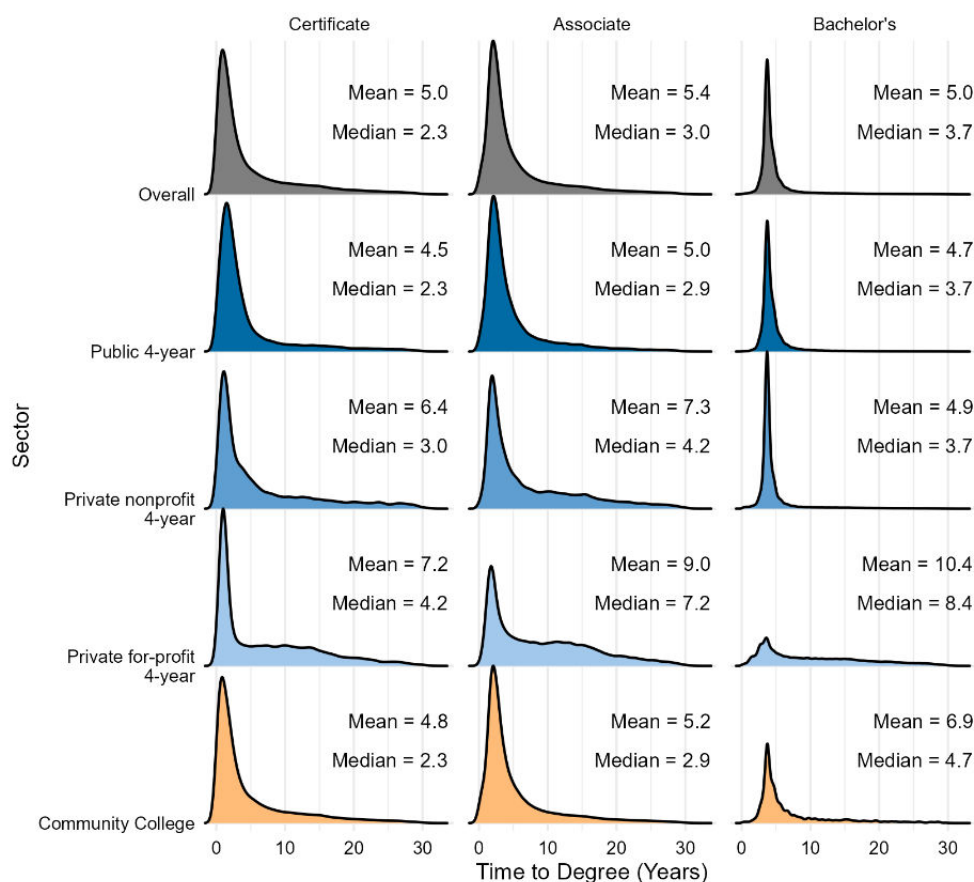
Active Enrolled time is defined as the elapsed time (described previously) minus the total amount of time in years a student was not enrolled in college (i.e. stopped out). This measure captures the time students spent actively enrolled in postsecondary education before earning their degree, excluding enrollment gaps.

For students who did not stopout prior to earning their degree, active Enrolled time is equal to elapsed time to degree. Active enrolled time is not weighted based on a student’s enrollment status.

### Median versus Mean to measure Time to Degree

Long stopout periods can substantially increase the mean time to degree, even when relatively few students experience them. As shown in Figure M1, a small share of students with very long elapsed times to degree can raise the mean by well over a year across award types and sectors. To reduce the influence of these extreme values, this report uses the median time to degree as its primary measure. For neighborhood income analyses, a weighted median is used to account for students assigned to income quintiles through ZIP code-based weighting.

Figure M1. Density Plot of Time to Degree by Institutional Sector at Award



## Student Pathways:

### Prior Dual Enrollment

National Student Clearinghouse data include dual enrollments, in which high school students enroll in one or more courses at postsecondary institutions. Because institutions are not required to report dual enrollments in data submissions, dual enrollments are estimated based on the student's age. Any enrollment record for a student who was under the age of 18 at the start of the enrollment period is classified as a dual enrollment record. Please note that the main analysis does not count dual enrollments in time to degree calculations.

### Completion at Starting Institution

Students completed a credential from the same institution where they first enrolled. Institution is determined at the 6-digit OPEID level.

### Number of Institutions Attended

Number of institutions attended is the count of distinct institutions a student enrolled in prior to completing their degree. Institution is evaluated at the six-digit OPEID level. This is to ensure consistency when evaluating an institution. While some schools may have distinct branch campuses at the 8-digit OPEID level, they are grouped together as one distinct institution.

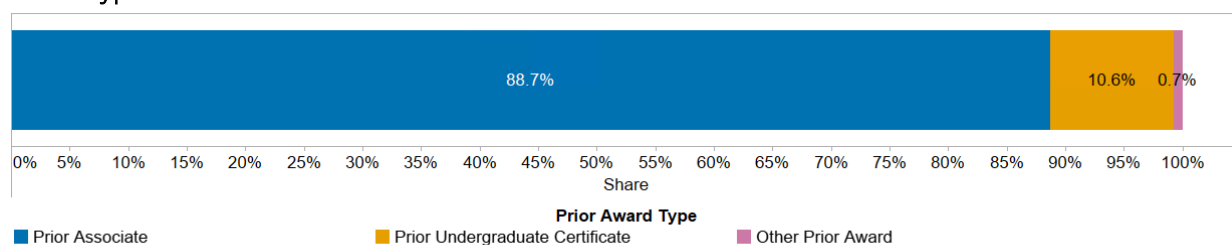
### Transferring from a Community College

This pathway refers to bachelor's degree earners who first enrolled at a community college and then completed their bachelor's degree at a four-year institution. A community college is defined as an institution that is classified as either a Public 2-year, or a Primarily Associate-Granting Baccalaureate institution (i.e. an institution that offers at least one baccalaureate degree program and awards more than half of their degrees at the associate level). While more community colleges in recent years have started awarding bachelor's degrees, this pathway is intended to investigate how the traditional 2-year to 4-year pipeline impacts time to degree attainment.

### Prior Undergraduate Award

Prior undergraduate award refers to bachelor's degree earners only that received an associate degree, certificate, or other undergraduate award type before earning their first bachelor's degree. A student could have earned multiple prior awards, but this report only considers the most recent prior award a student earned. Of the 448,000 bachelor's degree earners with a prior award, 88.7 percent had a prior associate while 10.6 percent had a prior certificate. A much smaller number of students (0.7%) had a different type of prior undergraduate award.

Figure M2. Distribution of 2024-25 Bachelor's earners who earned a prior undergraduate award by award type.



## Institution Characteristics:

### Sector at Award

Sector of the institution where students completed a credential. Institution is determined at the six-digit OPEID level.

### Sector at First Enrollment

Sector of the institution where students first enrolled. Institution is determined at the six-digit OPEID level.

### 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.

Multi-State Institutions are those with at least one branch campus (eight-digit OPEID) that is operative in a state different from the main campus (six-digit OPEID). Institutional locations are identified based on [IPEDS Institutional Characteristics](#) file. The 2023 survey was used for AY2024-25 graduates. 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.

### 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.

## Major Field:

Student major at completion is collected through the NSC Degree Verify service. Student majors are available only if the institutions that they graduated from have elected to participate in this service. Institutions report on student majors according to the US Department of Education's Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) code.

## Neighborhood Income Measure:

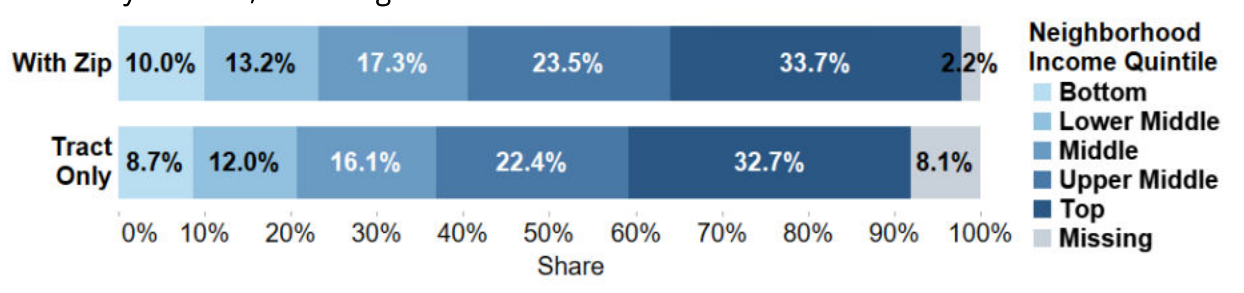
The neighborhood income measure provides information about the relative socioeconomic level of students' pre-college neighborhoods for students originating from the 50 U.S. states and Washington, D.C. Neighborhood income is highly correlated with other indicators of neighborhood socioeconomic status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

The measure utilizes street addresses reported to the Clearinghouse with each enrollment submission to locate students' homes in a particular census tract through geocoding. To best approximate socioeconomic origins, we use the first permanent address reported to the Clearinghouse for each student and apply the measure only to students who were 24 or younger at postsecondary entry (non-dual enrolled) and whose first higher education enrollment (including dual enrollment) occurred at age 19 or younger. We apply the measure to cohorts starting in 2010 and on due to the availability of external data sources needed to construct the measure. After these three restrictions—location of the first address, age at first enrollment, and data year of the first address (after 2010)—are taken into account, we are able to include 97.9 percent of students aged 24 and younger for neighborhood income analysis. Income data for each tract are sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates. These are adjusted using Regional Price Parity values from the Bureau of Economic Analysis to account for price level differences by state and metropolitan area. The quintiles referenced in this report are of tract median household income adjusted for household size. Quintiles are based on the national distribution of median household income, adjusted for household size, among all census tracts in the 50 states and D.C.

The vast majority (over 91%) of students included in the neighborhood income analyses in this report are successfully geocoded to a census tract. We also include an additional 5.9 percent of students who match to ZIP codes but not tracts. ZIP codes are generally larger than tracts, providing less granular measures of a student's pre-college neighborhood. To apply our tract-based neighborhood income measure to these students, we link ZIP codes to Census tracts using crosswalks produced by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). A student matching to a ZIP code is assigned weights equal to the share of all residential addresses within the ZIP code lying in tracts of each neighborhood income quintile. For each

ZIP-code matched student, the sum of these weights equals 1. Specifically, a student matched to a ZIP code that overlaps with two tracts: one in the lower middle quintile and the other in the middle neighborhood income quintile, with each tract encompassing half the residential addresses in that ZIP code, would be assigned quintile values for each of those quintiles with weights equal to 0.5 for each. Because our method assumes an equal probability of college-going from tracts of differing neighborhood income levels within the same ZIP code, we are likely slightly overestimating the share of students from lower-income neighborhoods using this method. However, as shown in figure M3, given the relatively small share of students assigned to income quintiles using ZIP code matches, the distribution of students by neighborhood income quintile does not differ greatly between an approach that includes only those students who are geocoded to census tracts and the one used here incorporating ZIP code matches. Inclusion of ZIP code matches also allows us to provide information on neighborhood income background for student groups for whom tract-level geocoding is substantially less successful, such as students from rural areas.

Figure M3. Comparison of Neighborhood Income Quintile Distribution Using ZIP Code Matches and Tract-Only Matches, 2024-25 graduates



In this report, students with missing neighborhood income quintile values are those who have met the sample restrictions described above, but that (1) we were unable to geocode to either a tract or a ZIP code (including all PO Box addresses) or (2) were geocoded to a tract (or a ZIP code which overlaps such a tract) for which ACS does not publicly publish income data. These missing rates are 2.2 percent for this report. The inability to geocode (rather than geocoding to a tract or ZIP code without income data) accounts for nearly all of these missing cases. Geocoding non-matches typically arise from issues relating to the quality of address data such as PO Box addresses and incomplete street addresses. Address quality may be correlated with both neighborhood and household income. Normally, for time to degree measures, the median is established as the middle value from a sorted series of values

## Enrollment Methodological Considerations:

### First Enrollment Record

The first enrollment record was identified for each student included in the study. It was defined as the enrollment record with the earliest term start date after a student turned 18, excluding dual enrollment records. Where this criterion did not result in the selection of a single enrollment record (i.e., when two or more enrollment records began on the same date, and where these records preceded all other records), we selected the record with the highest enrollment intensity (e.g., full-time enrollment over quarter-time enrollment).

### Enrollment Intensity:

Enrollment intensity is determined by the percentage of enrolled days a student was enrolled full-time across all their enrollment records from their first entry to the day they earned their degree. Full-time status is determined by the latest enrollment intensity reported to the Clearinghouse for that term. For example, if an enrollment term lasted 60 days, and the student was reported as full-time during that term, they would have 60 days of full-time enrollment. Enrollment intensity breakdowns are as such:

- *Exclusively Full-Time*: Students were enrolled full-time for 100 percent of their enrolled days.
- *Predominantly Full-Time*: Students were enrolled full-time between 80-99 percent of their enrolled days.
- *Mixed Enrollment Intensity*: Students were enrolled full-time between 20-79 percent of their enrolled days.
- *Predominantly Part-Time*: Students were enrolled full-time between 1-19 percent of their enrolled days.
- *Exclusively Part-Time*: Students were enrolled full-time for 0 percent of their enrolled days.

## Data Coverage Rates and Data Limitations

The National Student Clearinghouse currently collects data from approximately 3,600 postsecondary institutions, which represent 97 percent of all U.S. postsecondary enrollments in Title IV degree-granting institutions, as of 2019. Data collection began in 1993, and coverage has been above 90 percent nationally since 2007. However, some institution sectors have relatively lower coverage rates, particularly in the earlier years. Historically, private for-profit institutions have been under-covered in the NSC data. Details of annual data coverage rates are available [here](#). Variations in coverage, particularly during the early years of the study period, may result in an underestimate of the true time to degree results.

Data limitations for this report include definition of key constructs, methods used for cohort identification, and data coverage. For example, because dual enrollment information is not available in the Clearinghouse data, an age at enrollment proxy was used to flag dual enrollment records. Specifically, a student's first term was defined as the first enrollment record after a student turned 18. However, a small number of enrollment records may have been incorrectly flagged because some students do indeed enter college before turning 18 years old. For these students, the total time elapsed and total time enrolled may have been slightly underestimated.

Data limitations resulting from under-coverage also should be noted. Due to a lower coverage of degree data relative to enrollment data, students who earned a degree from a non-Clearinghouse participating institution are not included in the analysis. In addition, a small number of degrees defined as the student's first degree may not actually be the first degree if the student had previously earned a degree from a non-Clearinghouse participating institution.

The analysis of primarily online institutions is also subject to data limitations. A number of institutions or systems of institutions report their online campuses separately in the IPEDS survey but report them with their offline campuses under a single OPE identification when submitting data to NSC. In these cases, the students enrolled at the primarily online campus identified in IPEDS are not accurately identified as enrolled at a primarily online institution in this report, resulting in an underestimation of the impact that primarily online institutions may have on the time to degree.

### **Suggested Citation**

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