

Time to Degree

Measuring Student Pathway Impacts on Degree Attainment



National Student Clearinghouse[™]
Research Center[™]

Time to Degree

Measuring Student Pathway Impacts on Degree Attainment

Time to degree—the amount of time it takes a student to earn a degree after first enrolling at a postsecondary institution—has become an increasingly important measure of student success as policymakers, institutions, students, and families place greater emphasis on the value and affordability of higher education. Degree attainment represents an important milestone, but the time students spend reaching that goal can also provide insight into their educational experiences and the pathways they follow through higher education. Prior Clearinghouse research on student [completion](#), [transfer](#), and [attainment](#) has shown that students' paths through higher education are often neither direct nor uniform, involving movement across institutions, changes in enrollment patterns, and progression through multiple credentials. Time to degree, defined as the amount of time between a student's first enrollment in postsecondary education and degree completion, provides an additional lens for understanding students' progression through postsecondary education and the experiences that shape their route to completion. Taken together, these varied educational pathways require a comprehensive view of students' postsecondary journeys.

To provide this broader view of student pathways, this report draws on national student-level enrollment and completion data to examine time to degree among first-time undergraduate award earners, including certificate, associate degree, and bachelor's degree recipients, as well as bachelor's degree earners who previously earned another undergraduate award. The report evaluates both elapsed time from first enrollment to completion and active enrollment time, providing a more detailed view of students' educational journeys. Examining both measures makes it possible to distinguish the total time required to earn a credential from the time students spend actively enrolled pursuing that credential. The report also examines how time to degree varies across student groups and educational experiences such as dual enrollment, transfer, stopout, attendance at multiple institutions, and prior award attainment.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Time to degree varied widely across students and award type. Median time to first credential was under four years across award types, but many students took much longer, especially when their pathways were less continuous.
 - Among the 2.33 million students who earned their first-ever undergraduate degree in 2024-25, median time to degree was 3.7 years for bachelor's degrees, 3.0 years for associate degrees, and 2.3 years for certificates.
 - Although the median time to degree was under 4 years across all award types, the distribution of how long students took to finish their degree varied. Among all bachelor's degree earners, 13.5 percent of bachelor's earners finished in seven or more years, as did more than a quarter of associate and certificate earners.
- Stopouts were a major driver of longer completion times. Students who stopped out took longer overall and often needed more active enrolled time to earn an award.
 - Across all award types, the median elapsed time to degree increased with each additional stopout. Among first-time bachelor's earners, median time to degree rose from 3.7 years for students with no stopouts to 5.1 years for those with one stopout, 7.3 years for those with two stopouts, and more than 10 years for those with three or more stopouts.
- Stopouts helped explain differences across sectors and student groups.
 - Demographic time to degree differences were minimal among students who did not stopout. When students did stopout, differences emerged across gender, race and ethnicity, and neighborhood income quintiles.
- Complex pathways lengthened time to completion. Education pathways that involved transferring or attending multiple institutions, earning an award prior to finishing a bachelor's degree, institution or sector changes, and moving across states were associated with longer elapsed and active enrollment times.

Report Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
REPORT OVERVIEW	5
FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS.....	6
Median Time to Degree Completion Overview	6
Stopouts as an Influential Factor on Time to Degree Attainment	9
Complex Student Pathway Impacts on Time to Degree Attainment.....	12
Time to Degree Differences for All Bachelor's Earners	17
SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS	20

Figures & Tables

[Figure 1. Median Elapsed Time to Degree for AY2024-25 First-Time Degree Earners](#)

[Figure 2. Distribution of Elapsed Time to Degree in Years by Award Type](#)

[Figure 3. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type and Institution Sector](#)

[Figure 4. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type](#)

[Figure 5. Median Elapsed and Active Enrolled Time to Degree by Award Type and Number of Stopouts](#)

[Figure 6. Distribution of Stopout Count by Race and Ethnicity and Award Type](#)

[Figure 7. Median Elapsed Time to Degree for Black Degree Earners by Award Type and HBCU Status of Awarding Institution](#)

[Figure 8. Distribution of Stopout Count for Black Degree Earners by HBCU Status of Awarding Institution and Award Type](#)

[Figure 9. Bachelor's Earners Weighted Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Neighborhood Income Quintile Measure and Stopout Count](#)

[Figure 10. Distribution of Dual Enrollment Status by Award Type](#)

[Figure 11. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type, Stopout Count, and Dual Enrollment Status](#)

[Figure 12. Median Elapsed and Active Enrollment Time to Degree by Award Type and Institution Change Status Indicator of a Student's School at First Enrollment and School at Award](#)

[Figure 13. Distribution of the Number of Institutions Attended by Award Type](#)

[Figure 14. Distribution of Stopout Count by Sector at Award and Award Type](#)

[Figure 15. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type and Primarily Online Institution Status Indicator](#)

[Figure 16. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type and Primarily Online Status Indicator of Institution at Award](#)

[Figure 17. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type, Stopout Count, and Primarily Online Status Indicator for Institution at Award](#)

[Figure 18. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type and Completion within Same State Indicator](#)

[Figure 19. Bachelor's Earner's Distribution of Stopout Count by Prior Award Type](#)

[Figure 20. Bachelor's Earners' Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Stopout Count and Prior Award Status](#)

[Figure 21. Distribution of Bachelor's Earner's by Community College Transfer Status and Stopout Count](#)

[Figure 22. Median Bachelor's Earners' Elapsed Time to Degree by Community College Transfer Status](#)

REPORT OVERVIEW

The sample for this study comprises students who earned either an associate, bachelor's, or undergraduate certificate during the 2024-25 academic year (between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025). The report includes both first-time undergraduate degree earners (2.33 million students) and first-time bachelor's earners who earned a prior undergraduate award reflecting an additional 448,000 students. Together, 2.78 million students are included in the report.

This report evaluates time to degree through two measures:

Elapsed time is the length of time in years between the date when a student first entered postsecondary education and the date when they attained their degree. For example, a student who first enrolled in fall 2020 and earned a degree in spring 2025 would have an elapsed time of about five years.

Active enrolled time is the difference between elapsed time and the overall amount of time a student stopped out from enrollment. Stopouts are defined as any lapse of enrollment greater than 123 days, roughly longer than the time between the spring and fall semester in a traditional academic calendar. For example, if a student had five years of elapsed time but stopped out for one year, their active enrolled time would be about four years.

Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of time to degree by distinguishing total time from first enrollment to completion from the time students are actively enrolled, allowing us to better understand how interruptions in enrollment shape students' pathways to a degree.

This report uses the median to measure time to degree. This differs from our [2016 report](#), which reported time to degree using the mean. We are making this change because the median is less affected by a relatively small number of students who take substantially longer to complete a degree, often because of extended enrollment interruptions. As a result, the median provides a more representative measure of the typical student's experience and allows for more meaningful comparisons across student groups. For consistency, all time to degree results presented in this report are based on median values.

Please refer to the [Methodological Notes](#) for additional details on the measures and methods used in this report.

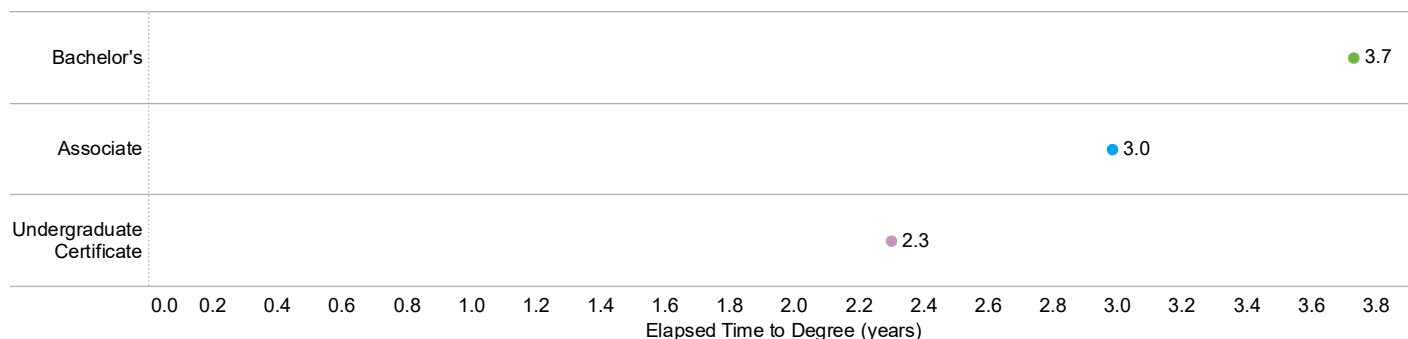
1. Median completion times were four years or less for degree earners across award types, yet many students took much longer to complete a degree.

In the 2024-25 academic year, 2.78 million students in this report earned an undergraduate credential. Median elapsed time to completion for all bachelor's degree earners (1.90 million students) was 4.0 years, including both first-time bachelor's degree earners and bachelor's degree earners who had previously earned a prior undergraduate award. Median elapsed time was 3.0 years for associate degree earners (601,000 students; Figure 1), and 2.3 years for certificate earners (281,000 students). To provide more accurate evaluations across award types, the remainder of this section focuses on first-time bachelor's, associate, and certificate earners.

Median time to degree was 3.7 years for first-time bachelor's earners, 3.0 years for associate earners, and 2.3 years for certificate earners, but many students took far longer – 13.5 percent of first-time bachelor's earners and more than one-quarter of associate and certificate earners took more than seven years to complete their degree.

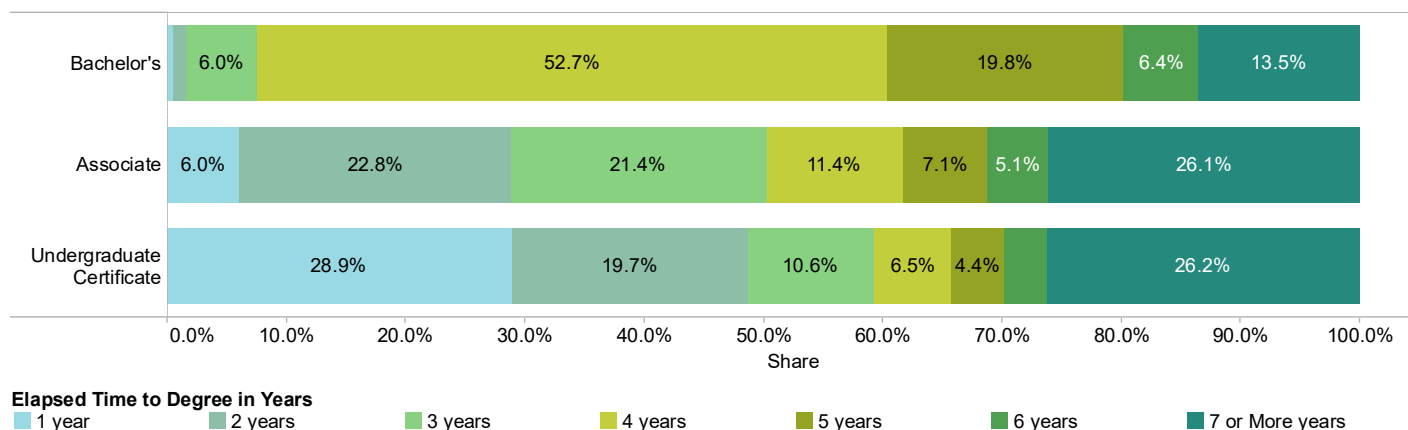
Most bachelor's degree earners (2.33 million; 76.4%) completed a bachelor's degree as their first-ever degree, and their median time to degree was 3.7 years (Figure 1)—roughly four academic years in a traditional academic calendar (i.e. fall and spring semesters only).

Figure 1. Median Elapsed Time to Degree for AY2024-25 First-Time Degree Earners



Although median completion times were below four years across award types, many students took considerably longer to complete their degree. Among first-time bachelor's degree earners, 13.5 percent took seven or more years to complete (Figure 2), as did more than one-quarter of associate and certificate earners.

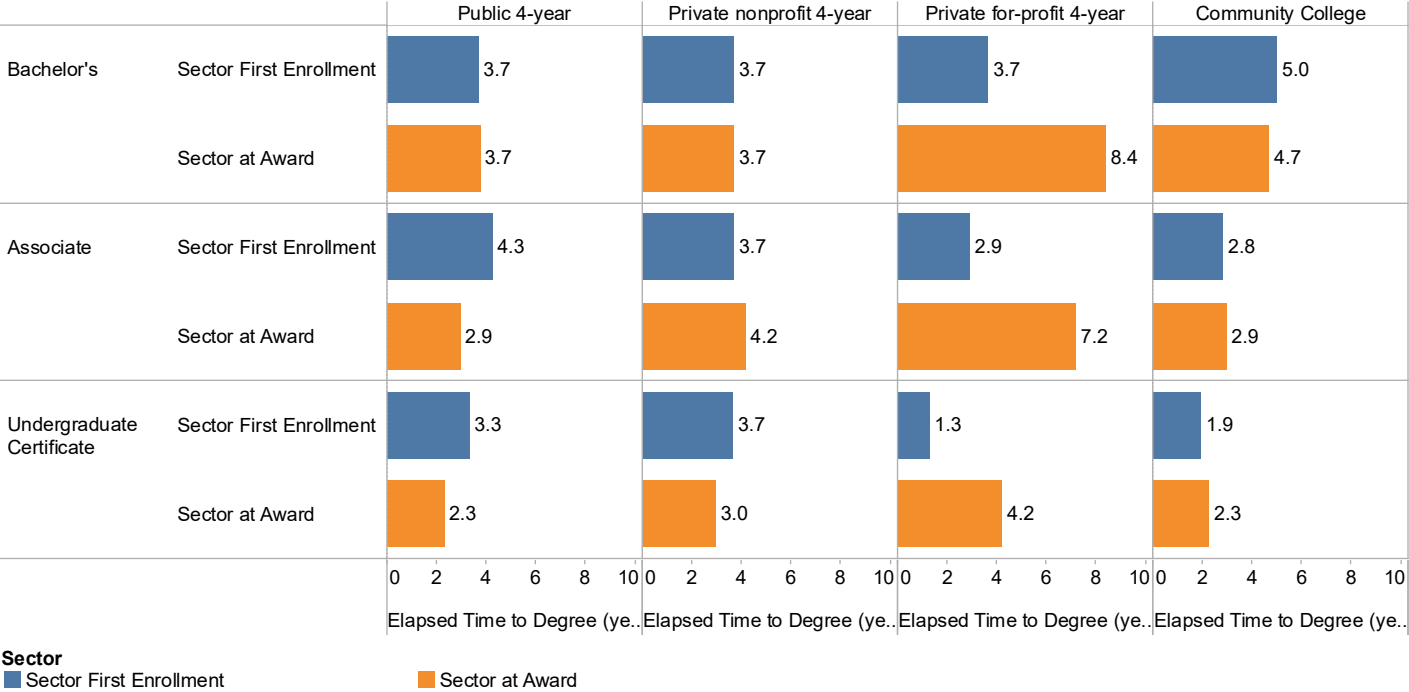
Figure 2. Distribution of Elapsed Time to Degree in Years by Award Type



For first-time bachelor’s degree earners who started at four-year institutions, median time to degree was 3.7 years (Figure 3). Three-quarters of starters at public or private nonprofit 4-year institutions finished their degree within four years (Private nonprofit 4-year: 75.5%, 304,000; Public 4-year: 65.0%, 510,000; Figure 4.3 on [Dashboard](#)) while just over half of those who started at private for-profit 4-year institutions earned their degree within four years (55.1%, 13,800).

Differences were larger when considering where students completed: students who completed at public or private nonprofit 4-year institutions had a median time to degree of 3.7 years, compared with 8.4 years for those who completed at private for-profit 4-year institutions (Figure 3). This difference was also evident in the share taking more than seven years to complete: 60 percent of bachelor’s degree earners who completed at private for-profit 4-year institutions took more than seven years to earn their degree, compared with 28.7 percent of those who started at private for-profit 4-year institutions.

Figure 3. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type and Institution Sector



Students who started at community colleges completed associate degrees in 2.8 years and completed a certificate in 1.9 years (Figure 3). Among certificate earners who completed at a four-year institution, those who finished at private for-profit 4-year institutions completed faster, with a median time of 1.3 years, compared to public and private nonprofit 4-year starters (3.3 years and 3.7 years, respectively).

Students who completed at private for-profit 4-year institutions took 7.2 years to earn an associate degree and 4.2 years to earn a certificate. These longer times to finish are also reflected in the distribution of degree time. Among associate degree earners who finished at private for-profit 4-year institutions, more than half (54.5%, 13,000 students; Figure 4.2 on [Dashboard](#)) took more than seven years to complete their degree.

Time to degree behaviors by gender varied across award type with bachelor's completers showing different trends compared to associate and certificate earners. In contrast, students who were older when they started pursuing their degree took longer to complete regardless of the award type.

Time to degree varied by gender and by the age at which students first entered college. Women completed bachelor's degrees faster than men, finishing in 3.7 years compared to 3.9 years for men (Figure 3.1 on [Dashboard](#)). A larger share of women were also more likely to finish within four years (63.5% versus 55.1% for men; Figure 4.5 on [Dashboard](#)). However, similar shares of women and men took seven or more years to complete a bachelor's degree (12.9% of women and 15.0% of men). For shorter-term credentials, the pattern reversed: men completed associate degrees in 2.9 years versus 3.3 years for women and certificates in 1.8 years versus 2.7 years. This difference reflected a higher share of women taking more than seven years to complete associate degrees (28.5% vs. 23.4%) and certificates (30.5% vs. 22.2%).

Students who first entered college between ages 18 and 20 completed associate and bachelor's degrees faster than those who were older at entry, taking 2.9 years to complete an associate and 3.7 years to complete a bachelor's degree (Figure 3.1 on [Dashboard](#)). In contrast, students who entered college in their twenties took the longest to complete these credentials. Among bachelor's degree earners, median time to degree was 4.7 years for those who entered at ages 21 to 24 and 6.3 years for those who entered at ages 25 to 29. Notably, a larger share of these older entrants took seven or more years to finish (40.6% for 21-24, 51.3% for 25-29, 37% for 30 or older compared to 11.0% for 18-20; Figure 4.5 on [Dashboard](#)). A similar trend held for associate completers, with a larger share of older age groups taking seven or more years to complete (39.3% for 21-24, 38.6% for 25-29, 27.6% for 30 or older compared to 23.1% for 18-20).

A higher share of full-time enrollment was associated with faster completion, while students who enrolled predominantly part-time had the longest timelines across all award types.

This report evaluates enrollment intensity by the share of full-time enrollment – see [Methodological Notes](#) for additional details. Consistent with [prior research](#), students enrolled less than full-time took longer to complete a bachelor's degree. About 67 percent of bachelor's degree earners, or 970,000 students, were full time for at least 80 percent of their enrolled time (exclusively full time and predominantly full time), with a median time to degree of 3.7 years (Figure 1.4 on [Dashboard](#)). Students with mixed full-time and part-time enrollment took longer, at 4.7 years, while those enrolled mostly part-time had the longest completion times: 11.9 years for predominantly part-time students and 5.0 years for exclusively part-time students.

Associate and certificate earners also follow a similar trend: students enrolled exclusively full-time completed substantially faster than those with mixed full-time and part-time enrollment. Exclusively full-time students took 1.7 years to complete an associate degree and 0.7 years to complete a certificate.

Across all award types, predominantly part-time students—those enrolled part-time for at least 80 percent of their enrolled time—took the longest to complete, even longer than exclusively part-time students. Their median times to degree were 11.9 years for bachelor's degrees, 6.7 years for associate degrees, and 7.7 years for certificates, reflecting the large shares who took seven or more years to complete (79.5%, 54.9%, and 58.6%, respectively; Figure 4.4 on [Dashboard](#)).

The substantial share of students who take seven or more years is especially important because extended completion times may reflect barriers to persistence and timely attainment. The remainder of the report examines how complexities in the postsecondary journey, such as stopouts and transferring or attending multiple institutions, help explain why some students complete quickly while others take much longer.

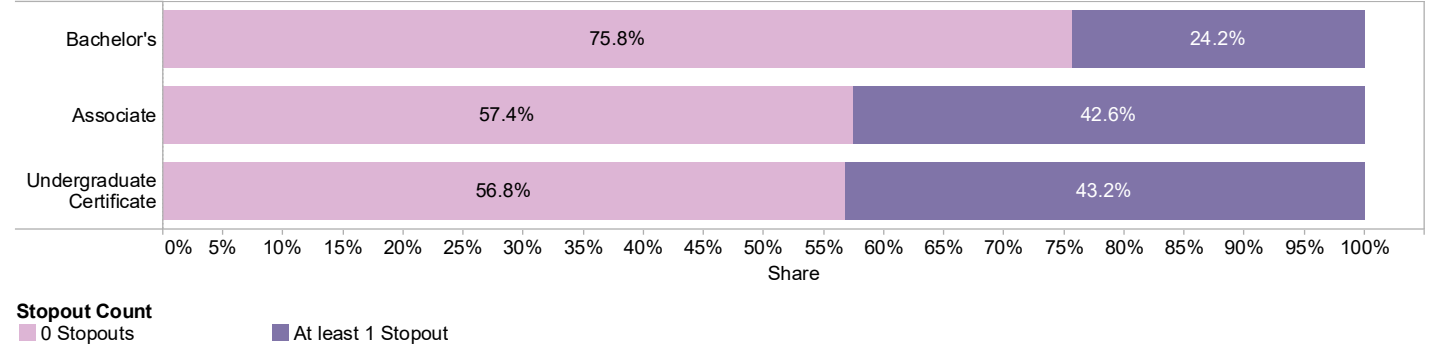
2. Stopping out from postsecondary education is the most influential factor toward longer time to degree attainment that elongates not only overall time to degree, but also how long students are actively enrolled.

Stopouts are a key contributor to longer time to degree. A stopout is any break in enrollment lasting more than 123 days—roughly longer than the period between a traditional spring and fall semester. For example, a student who enrolls in fall 2020, stops enrolling after that term, and returns in fall 2022 would be counted as having a stopout. By definition, stopping out extends a student’s elapsed time to degree, but stopouts also extend the time students spend actively enrolled. In other words, students who stopped out took additional enrolled terms after returning from a stopout to complete compared to those who did not stopout. The frequency of stopouts varied across award types and demographic groups which contributed to disparities in time to degree.

Higher shares of associate and certificate completers had at least one stopout prior to completion compared to bachelor’s earners.

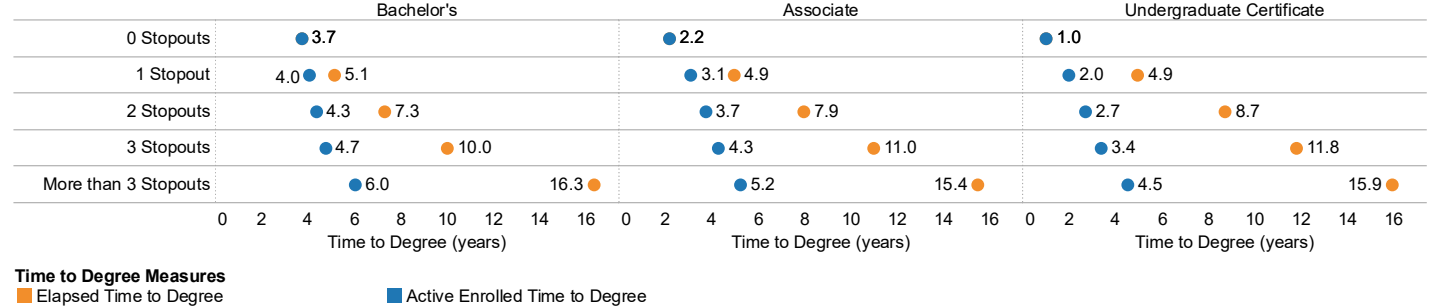
Three-quarters of bachelor’s degree earners had no stopouts (Figure 4) and completed their degree in 3.7 elapsed years (Figure 5). Among those with stopouts, elapsed time to degree increased with each additional stopout: 5.1 years for one stopout, 7.3 years for two stopouts, and more than 10 years for three or more stopouts. Active enrolled time also increased, from 4.0 years for students with one stopout to more than 4.7 years for those with three or more stopouts.

Figure 4. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type



Stopouts were more common among shorter-term credential earners, with more than 40 percent of associate and certificate earners stopping out at least once. As with bachelor’s degree earners, stopouts substantially extended both elapsed and active enrolled time. Associate degree earners with no stopouts completed in a median elapsed time of 2.2 years, compared with 4.9 years for those with one stopout and more than 11 years for those with three or more stopouts (Figure 5). Active enrolled time also increased with each stopout; for associate degree earners with three or more stopouts, it was about twice as long as for those with no stopouts (4.3 years for 3 stopouts and 5.2 years for more than 3 stopouts compared to 2.2 years for no stopouts). The same trend held for certificate earners, whose elapsed and enrolled times also increased with each additional stopout.

Figure 5. Median Elapsed and Active Enrolled Time to Degree by Award Type and Number of Stopouts

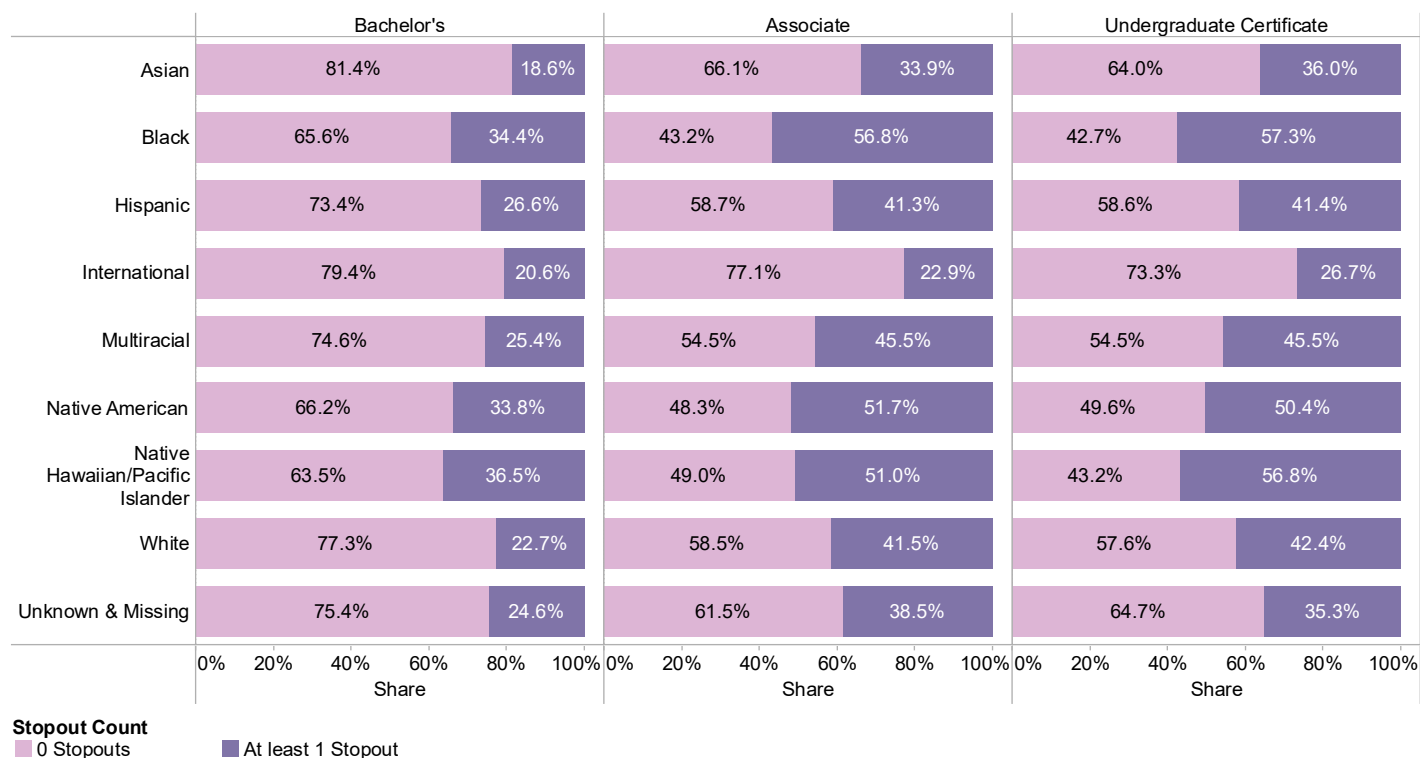


Differences in stopout rates across demographic groups help explain disparities in time to degree.

Time to degree varied across racial and ethnic groups. Among bachelor's degree earners, median time to degree was 3.7 years for Asian, International, Multiracial, and White students, 4.0 years for Hispanic students, and 4.3 years for Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian students (Figure 3.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Differences were also evident in the distribution of completion times: less than 20 percent of Asian, Hispanic, International, Multiracial, and White bachelor's degree earners took seven or more years to complete, compared with about one-quarter of Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian students (Figure 4.5 on [Dashboard](#)). Much of this variation, however, was associated with differences in stopout patterns.

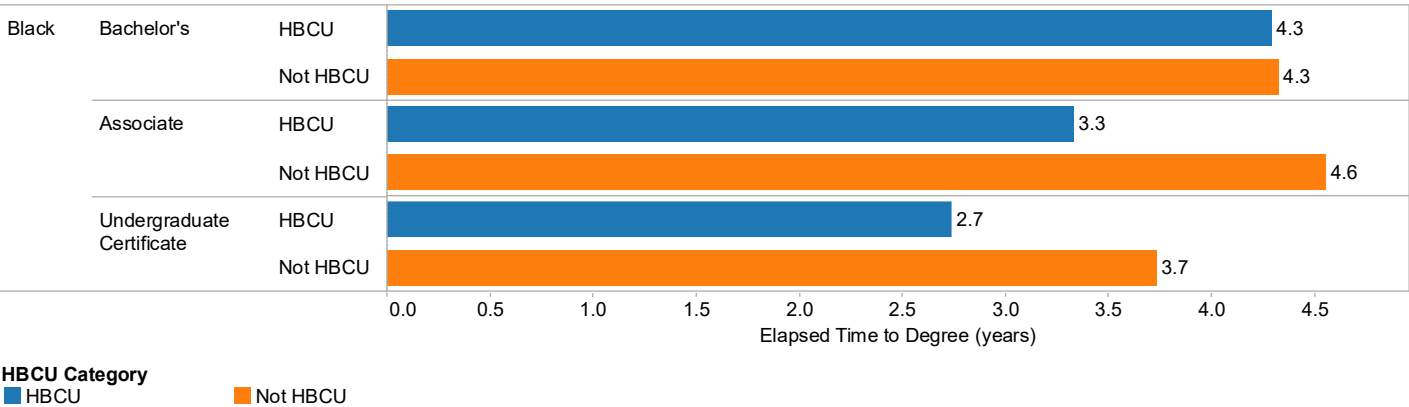
Stopout patterns accounted for much of the variation in time to degree across racial and ethnic groups. Among students who did not stop out, median elapsed time to degree varied less across racial and ethnic groups particularly for bachelor's and associate earners (Figure 3.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Differences emerged primarily among students with one or more stopouts. Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students were more likely than other groups to stopout before completing a credential: more than half of associate and certificate completers and more than one-third of bachelor's completers in these groups had at least one stopout (Figure 6). Among those who stopped out, about one-third of bachelor's and associate completers had three or more stopouts, contributing to substantially longer elapsed time to degree than among other racial and ethnic groups with stopouts (8.3 years for bachelor's earners and 8.7 to 9.3 years for associate earners). Stopouts increased active enrolled time across all racial and ethnic groups (Figure 2.5 on [Dashboard](#)), though variation across groups was smaller for active enrolled time than for elapsed time. These findings suggest that differences in stopout patterns help explain a substantial share of the racial and ethnic disparities observed in overall time to degree.

Figure 6. Distribution of Stopout Count by Race and Ethnicity and Award Type



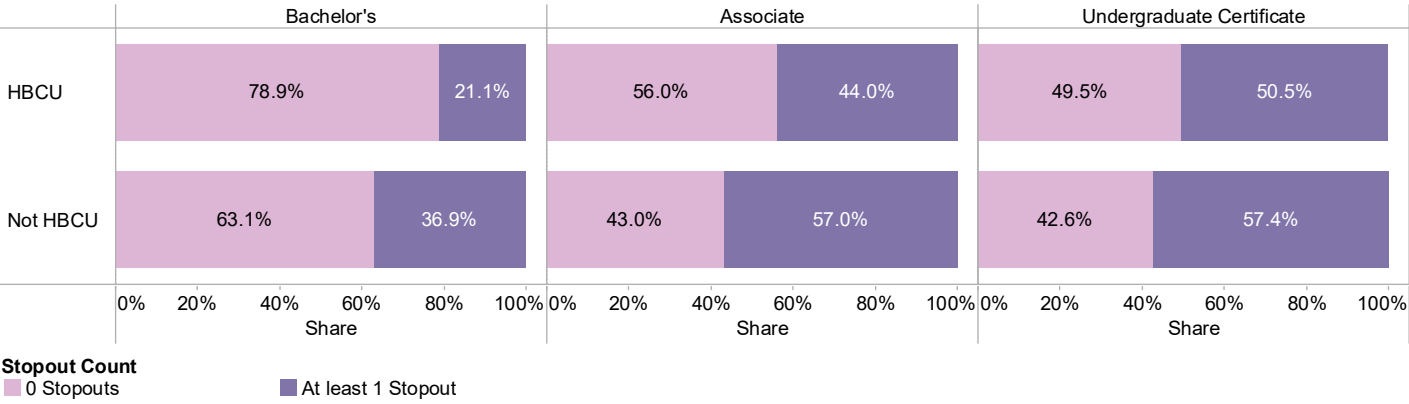
Among Black students, stopout experiences also differed by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) attendance. Black students who enrolled at HBCUs generally completed associate and certificates faster than those at non-HBCUs. Median completion times were 3.3 years for associate degrees and 2.7 years for certificates, about 1.0 to 1.3 years shorter than for Black students at non-HBCUs. For bachelor's degrees, Black students completed in 4.3 years at both HBCU and non-HBCUs (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Median Elapsed Time to Degree for Black Degree Earners by Award Type and HBCU Status of Awarding Institution



These differences were associated with stopout patterns. Across all credential levels, Black students who graduated from HBCUs were more likely than those who graduated from non-HBCUs to have no stopouts: 78.9 percent versus 63.1 percent for bachelor's degrees, 56.0 percent versus 43.0 percent for associate degrees, and 49.5 percent versus 42.6 percent for certificates (Figure 8). Among Black students with no stopouts or one stopout, median time to degree was similar at HBCUs and non-HBCUs (see Appendix).

Figure 8. Distribution of Stopout Count for Black Degree Earners by HBCU Status of Awarding Institution and Award Type

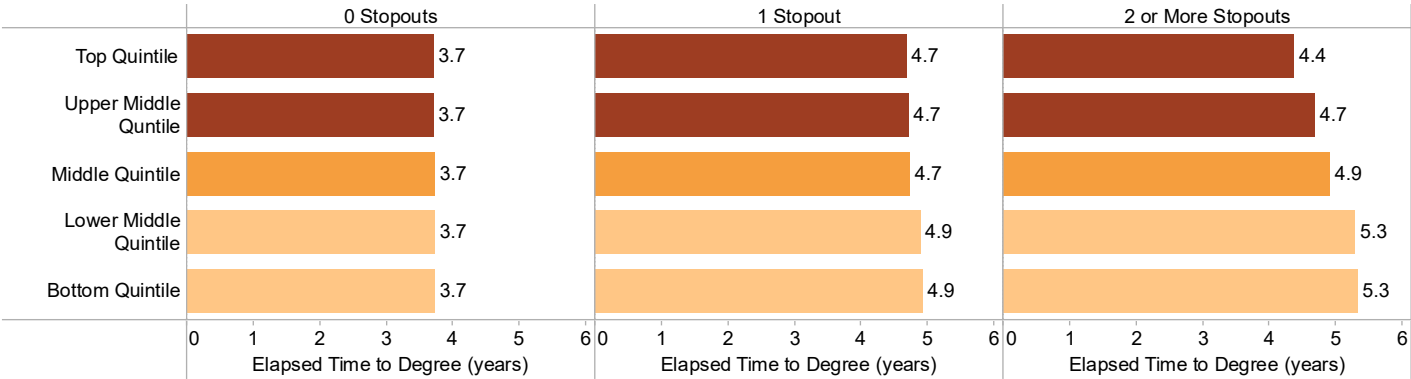


For Black bachelor's degree recipients with two stopouts, median elapsed time to degree was shorter at HBCUs than at non-HBCUs (8.3 years vs. 9.2 years; see Appendix), but this advantage was no longer evident among those with three or more stopouts. Overall, Black students at HBCUs tended to complete faster than Black students at non-HBCUs, especially when they had no or limited number of stopouts.

Stopouts also helped explain gender differences in time to degree, especially for shorter-term credentials. Women were more likely than men to complete an associate degree or certificate after at least one stopout (45% to 48% for women versus about 40% and 39% for men), contributing to longer median completion times for women than men in these programs (3.3 years vs. 2.9 years for associate degrees and 2.7 years vs. 1.8 years for certificates; Figure 3.1 on [Dashboard](#)).

Similar disparities appeared by neighborhood income quintile, particularly among bachelor’s degree earners. Among continuously enrolled students, time to degree was comparable across neighborhood income quintiles. Among students who stopped out, however, completion times increased more sharply for those from lower-income neighborhoods than for those from higher-income neighborhoods (Figure 3.2 on [Dashboard](#)). This difference was especially evident among bachelor’s degree earners with multiple stopouts: students from lower income quintile neighborhoods who stopped out two or more times took 5.3 years to complete, compared with 4.4 years for students from top income quintile neighborhoods (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Bachelor’s Earners Weighted Median¹ Elapsed Time to Degree by Neighborhood Income Quintile Measure and Stopout Count



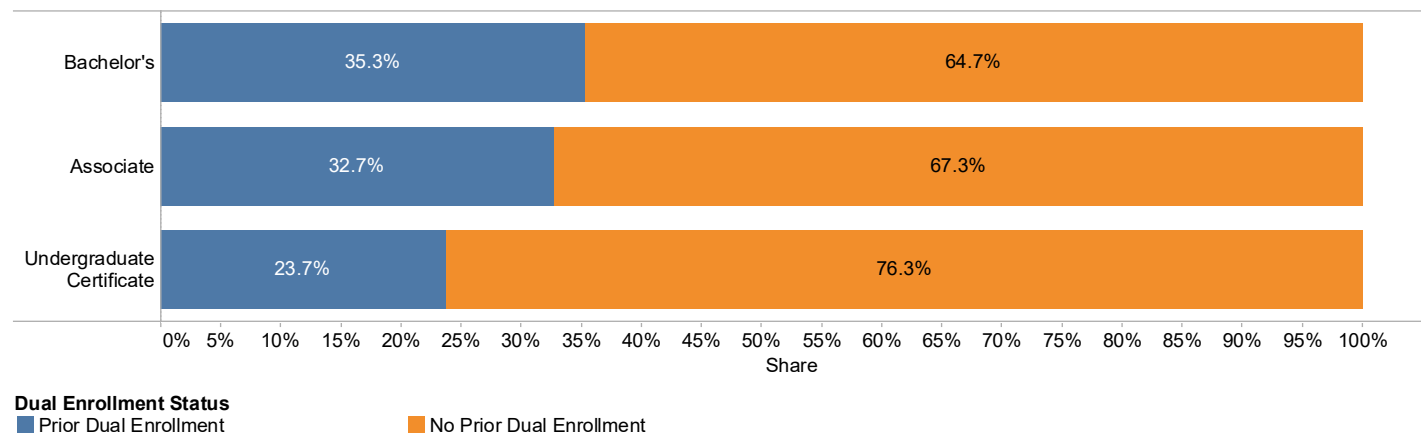
3. Students who had prior dual enrollment experience saw shorter time to degree attainment. Meanwhile, those with more complex pathways—such as moving across institutions, credentials, or states—not only took longer to complete their degree, but they also spent more time actively enrolled pursuing that degree.

Prior dual enrollment was associated with shorter completion times and lower instances of stopping out.

About one-third of associate (32.7%, 197,000) and bachelor’s degree completers (35.3%, 513,000) participated in dual enrollment programs (high school students taking college-level courses; Figure 10). Students with prior dual enrollment completed faster than those without prior dual enrollment for associate and undergraduate certificate earners. Certificate earners finished roughly half a year sooner (1.7 years versus 2.3 years) whereas associate earners with prior dual enrollment finished close to a year and a half sooner (2.3 years versus 3.7 years; Figure 1.1 on [Dashboard](#)). For bachelor’s degree earners, overall median time to degree was the same regardless of prior dual enrollment (3.7 years).

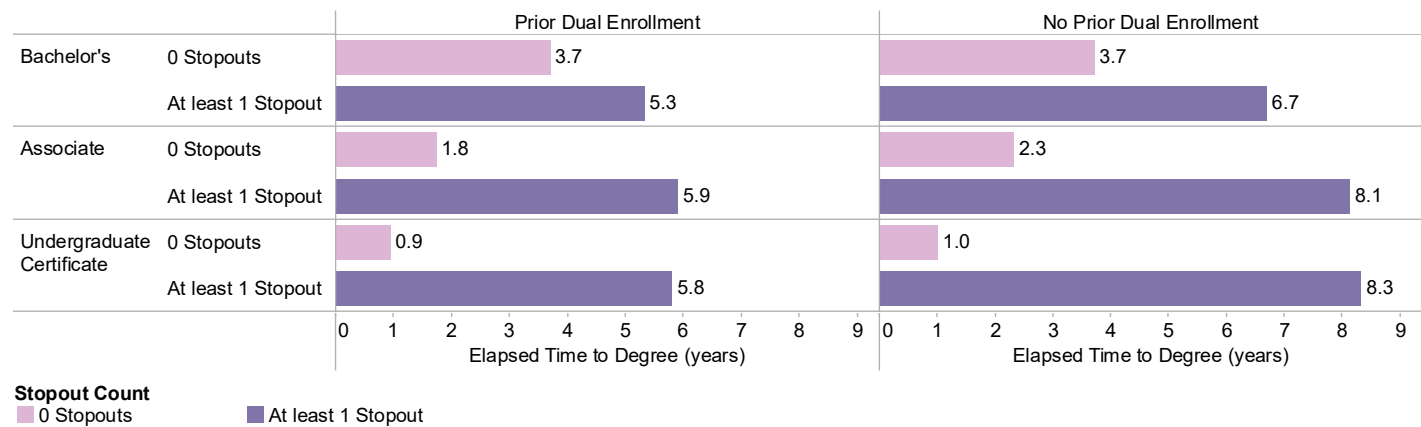
¹ The Neighborhood Income Measure leverages census-tract matching, and student address zip-code matching to determine neighborhood income quintiles. For a student matching to a zip code, they are assigned weights equal to the share of all residential addresses within the ZIP code lying in tracts of each neighborhood income quintile. Thus, the median time to degree is weighted to account for underlying weights in the income distribution. Please see the Methodological Notes for more information.

Figure 10. Distribution of Dual Enrollment Status by Award Type



However, differences emerged among students who experienced stopouts. Across award types, dual enrollees with a given number of stopouts completed more quickly than non-dual enrollees with the same stopout history (Figure 11). Among bachelor's earners with more than one stopout, those with prior dual enrollment completed more than a year sooner than those without prior dual enrollment. The difference is more than two years for associate and certificate earners.

Figure 11. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type, Stopout Count, and Dual Enrollment Status



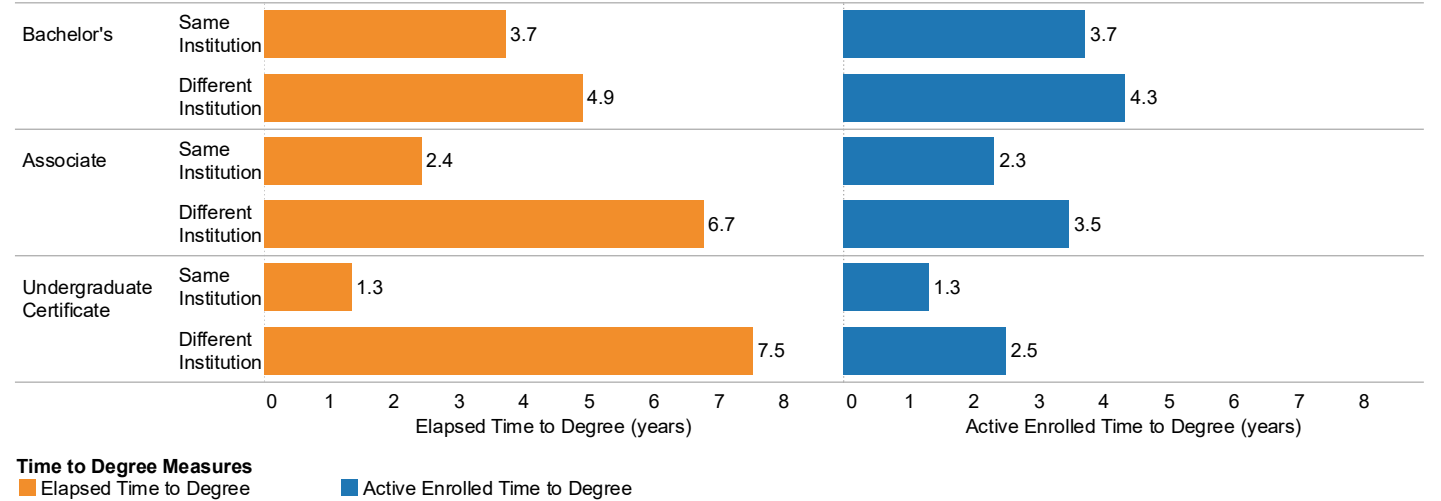
On the other hand, students' educational journeys often extended beyond a single institution, credential, or state. This section examines several forms of pathway complexity, including transferring or attending multiple institutions, earning a prior credential before a bachelor's degree, and movement across state lines. Across these pathways, students generally took longer to complete their degree and, in many cases, spent more time actively enrolled before earning a credential.

Students who attended more than one institution before earning a degree had longer active enrollment time and longer total time to credential completion.

Institution changes refer to students earning a degree from a different institution than the one where they first enrolled. For example, a student who begins at one community college, later enrolls at another community college, and earns an associate degree from the second institution would be counted as having changed institutions. Students may also move from a public four-year institution to a primarily online institution for greater flexibility or attend multiple institutions before completing a credential.

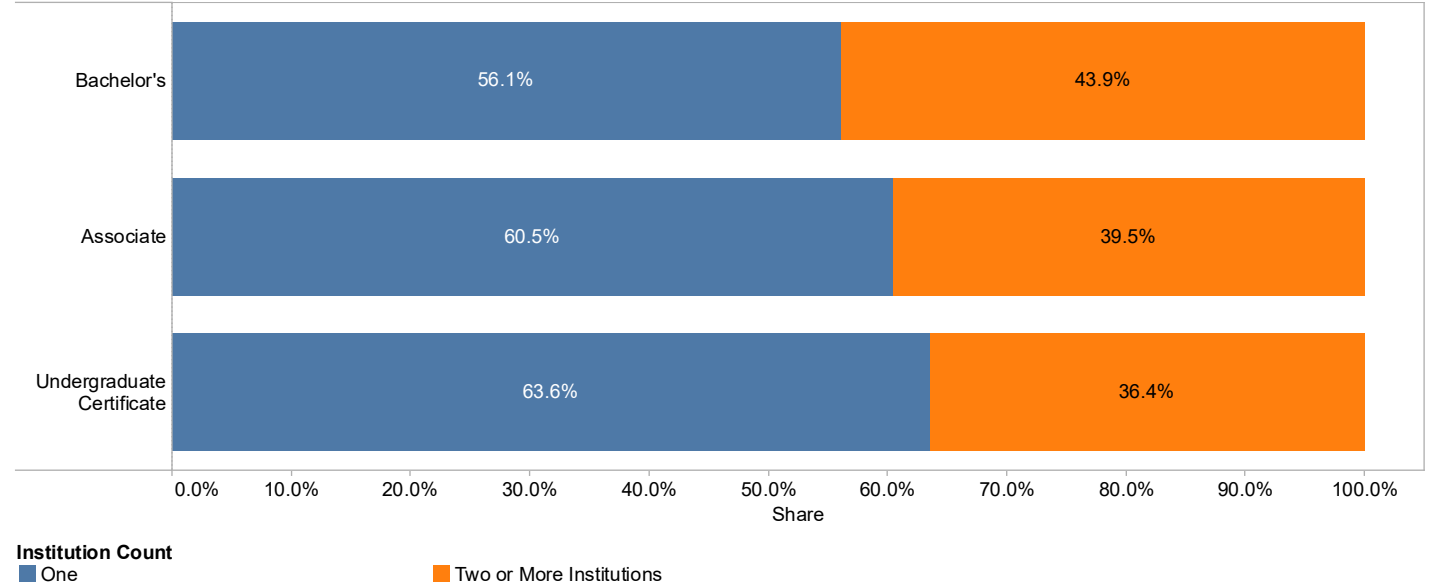
Institution changes were prevalent across award types with 30.2 percent of bachelor’s degree completers (438,000) earning their degree at a different institution than the one where they first enrolled (Figure 1.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Associate degree and certificate earners changed institutions at similar rates, 30.9 percent and 33.3 percent, respectively. Completing at a different institution was associated with substantially longer time toward completing their degree ranging from 1.2 to 6.2 years longer (Figure 12). Active enrollment also increased when students changed institutions, with students remaining enrolled an additional 0.6 to 1.2 years across award types compared to students who completed at the institution where they first enrolled.

Figure 12. Median Elapsed and Active Enrollment Time to Degree by Award Type and Institution Change Status Indicator of a Student’s School at First Enrollment and School at Award



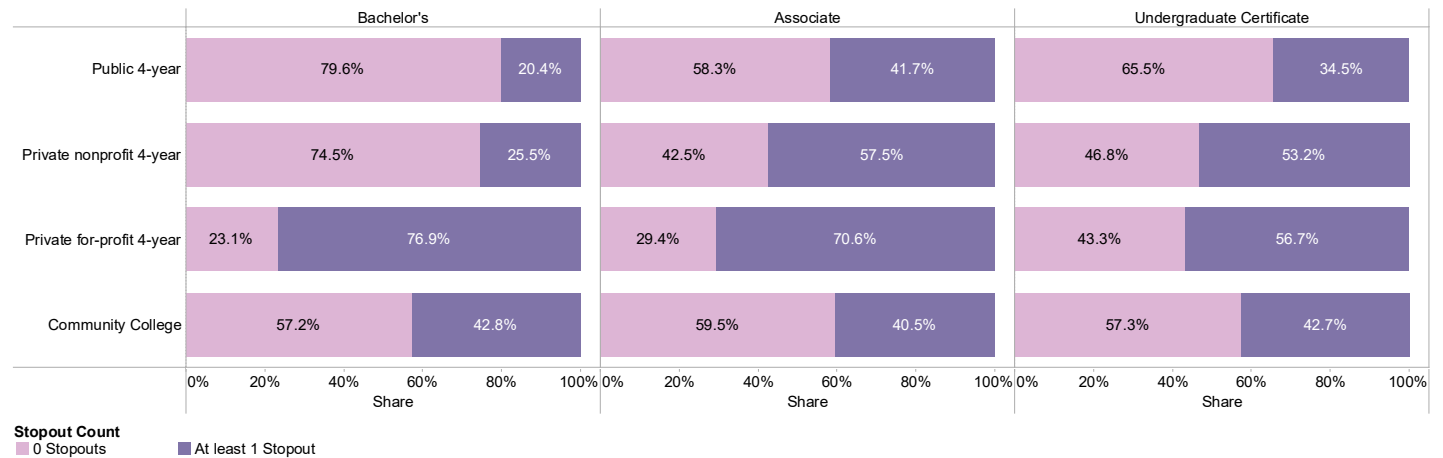
The number of institutions students attended further illustrates the complexity of their pathways. Among first-time degree completers, 43.9 percent of bachelor’s degree completers attended two or more institutions (636,000), most commonly two institutions (29.5%, 428,000). Attending two or more institutions was less common among associate degree and certificate earners, at 39.5 percent and 36.4 percent, respectively (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Distribution of the Number of Institutions Attended by Award Type



Attending multiple institutions was associated with longer completion timelines, particularly when students both changed institutions and experienced stopouts. This pattern was most pronounced among bachelor's degree earners who completed at private for-profit 4-year institutions: 67.5 percent earned their degree from a different institution than where they first enrolled, and their median time to degree was 12.7 years, compared with 3.3 years for those who completed at their starting institution (Figure 1.2 on [Dashboard](#)). Stopout behavior illuminates these differences in elapsed time to degree, as more than three-quarters of bachelor's completers had stopped out and 19.3 percent had stopped out more than three times before earning a degree (Figure 14). These findings suggest that many students who completed at private for-profit 4-year institutions followed more complex pathways marked by both institution changes and stopouts.

Figure 14. Distribution of Stopout Count by Sector at Award and Award Type



Students who completed at a Primarily Online Institution (POI) had substantially longer times to degree than students who completed at non-POIs. Median time to degree was 10.7 years for bachelor's earners, 8.5 years for associate earners, and 8.1 years for certificate earners who completed at a POI (Figure 15). This pattern differed from what was observed among students who started at a POI, whose completion times were considerably shorter. Stopout behavior helps explain this difference: across credential types, at least 69 percent of first-time degree earners who completed at a POI had experienced one or more stopouts before earning their credential (Figure 16).

Figure 15. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type and Primarily Online Institution Status Indicator

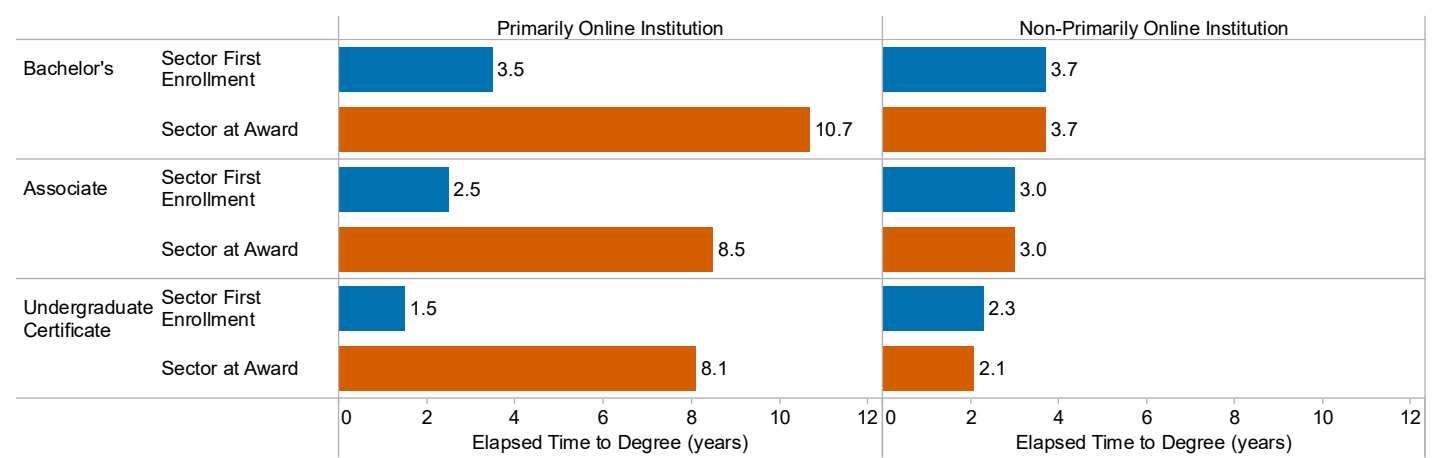
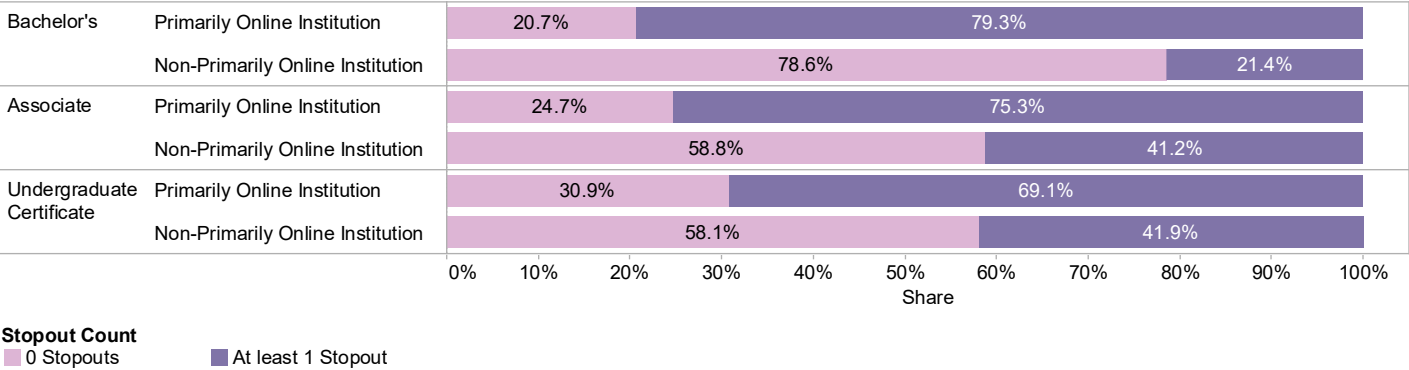
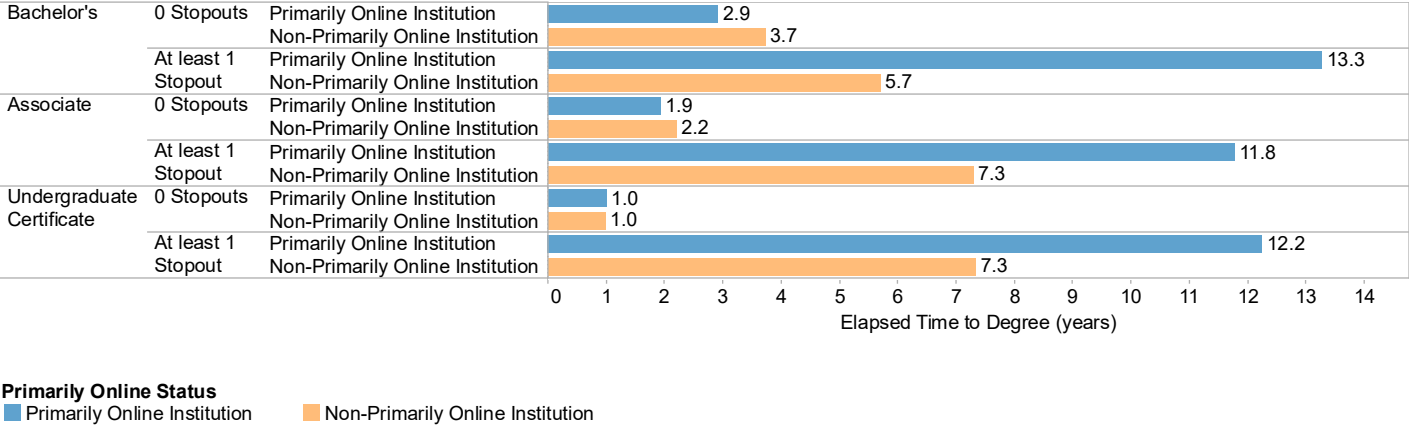


Figure 16. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type and Primarily Online Status Indicator of Institution at Award



Among students without stopouts, completion times were comparable for POI and non-POI completers: 2.9 versus 3.7 years for bachelor's degrees, 1.9 versus 2.2 years for associate degrees, and 1.0 year for certificates (Figure 17). These patterns indicate that the longer completion times observed among POI completers are closely tied to pathway complexity, particularly the high prevalence of stopouts prior to earning a credential.

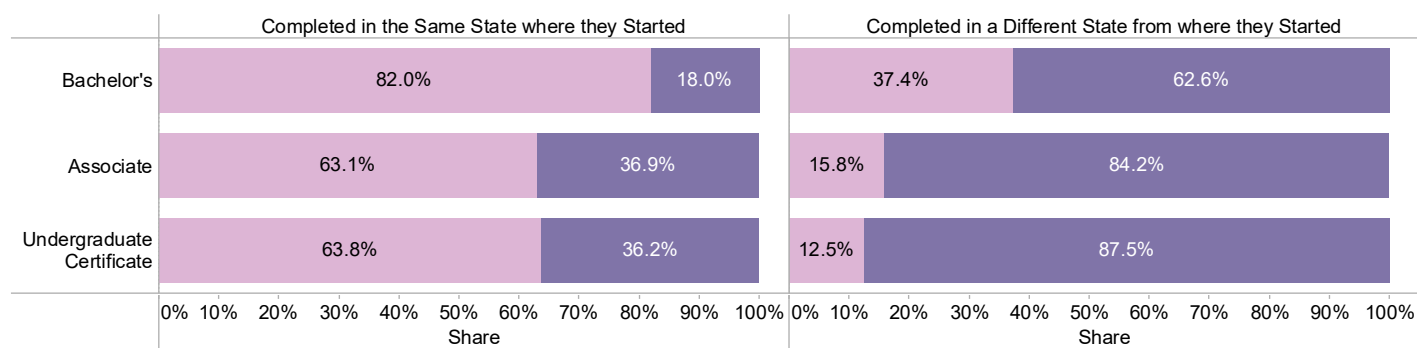
Figure 17. Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Award Type, Stopout Count, and Primarily Online Status Indicator for Institution at Award



Students who crossed state lines followed more complex routes to completion and took longer to earn a credential.

Another example of pathway complexity is geographic complexity and movement between states. Across all states and award types, students who completed in the same state where they first enrolled finished faster than those who crossed state lines (Figure 6.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Completers who stayed in the same state were also less likely to stopout (Figure 18). Among students who crossed state lines, associate and certificate earners had higher instances of stopping out, which substantially extended their time to degree. For example, in California, Florida, New York, and Texas—the states with the largest numbers of associate completers—more than 70 percent of out-of-state completers had at least one stopout, compared with about 30 percent of completers who stayed in the same state (See Appendix).

Figure 18. Distribution of Stopout Count by Award Type and Completion within Same State Indicator



Bachelor's completers who crossed state lines were also more likely to stopout than those who completed in the same state (Figure 18). However, among students who crossed state lines, bachelor's completers had fewer stopouts than associate and certificate earners, helping explain why the time-to-degree difference was smaller for bachelor's earners. In more than one-third of states (19 states including Washington, D.C.; Figure 6.3 on [Dashboard](#)), more than half of bachelor's completers who crossed state lines had no stopouts. This contrasts with shorter term credential earners where there are no states with more than half of associate and certificate earners who crossed state lines that did not stopout.

4. Enrollment gaps partially account for time to degree attainment differences for those who earned a prior award and those who transferred.

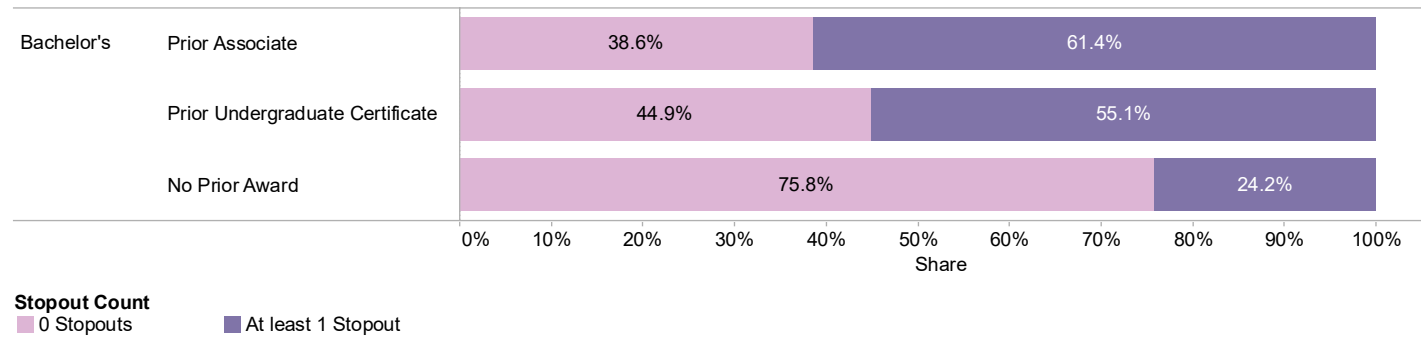
The following analyses investigate students who either earned a bachelor's degree as their first-ever award, or bachelor's earners who previously earned a different undergraduate award. Examining these students together enables a better understanding of the impact earning a prior award and transferring has on time to degree attainment.

Bachelor's earners who earned a prior award took longer to complete their bachelor's degree partly due to enrollment gaps prior to earning their bachelors.

Students who earned a prior award before completing their bachelor's degree reflect 23.6 percent of all bachelor's earners in this analysis. Nearly 89 percent of these students earned a prior associate while 10.6 percent earned an undergraduate certificate. Prior award earners saw longer elapsed time to degree attainment compared to those who did not have a prior award partly due to enrollment gaps. Bachelor's earners who completed any kind of prior undergraduate award took more than 1.5 times longer (6.3 years for prior associate and 5.7 years for prior certificate) to complete their bachelor's degree compared to those without a prior award (3.7 years; Figure 1.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Bachelor's earners with a prior undergraduate certificate took over half a year less to earn a bachelor's (5.7 years) compared to prior associate earners (6.3 years).

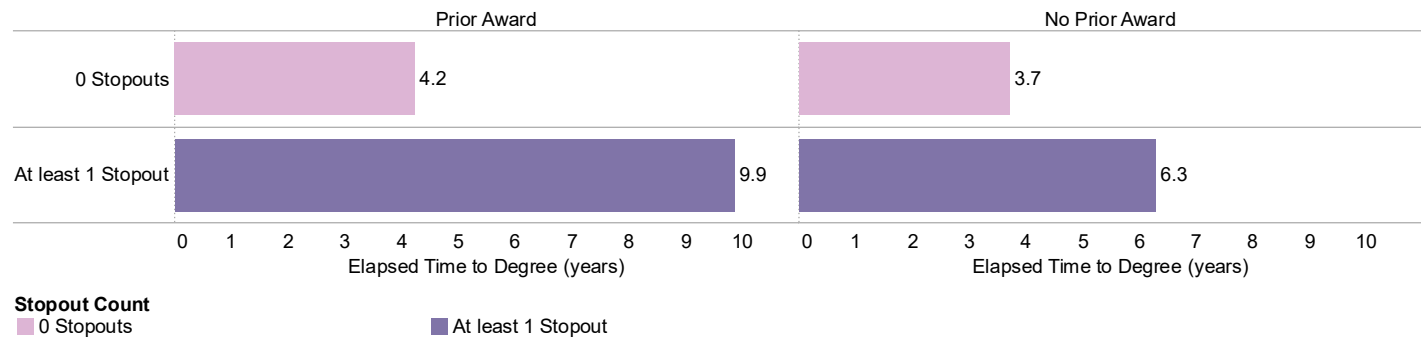
Stopout behaviors provide context for some of the time to degree differences for prior award earners. Among those with a prior certificate, 44.9 percent did not stopout compared to 38.6 percent of bachelor's earners with a prior associate (Figure 19). In contrast, over three-quarters (75.8%) of bachelor's earners without a prior award did not stopout before completing their degree.

Figure 19. Bachelor's Earner's Distribution of Stopout Count by Prior Award Type



Stopout behavior subsequently had an impact on elapsed time to degree. Among prior award earners who had at least one stopout, their median elapsed time to degree was over three years longer (9.9 years) compared to those without a prior award (6.3 years; Figure 20). Among those who did not stop out prior to earning their bachelor's, the difference in time to degree behaviors between prior award earners and those without a prior award were smaller (4.2 years versus 3.7 years).

Figure 20. Bachelor's Earners' Median Elapsed Time to Degree by Stopout Count and Prior Award Status

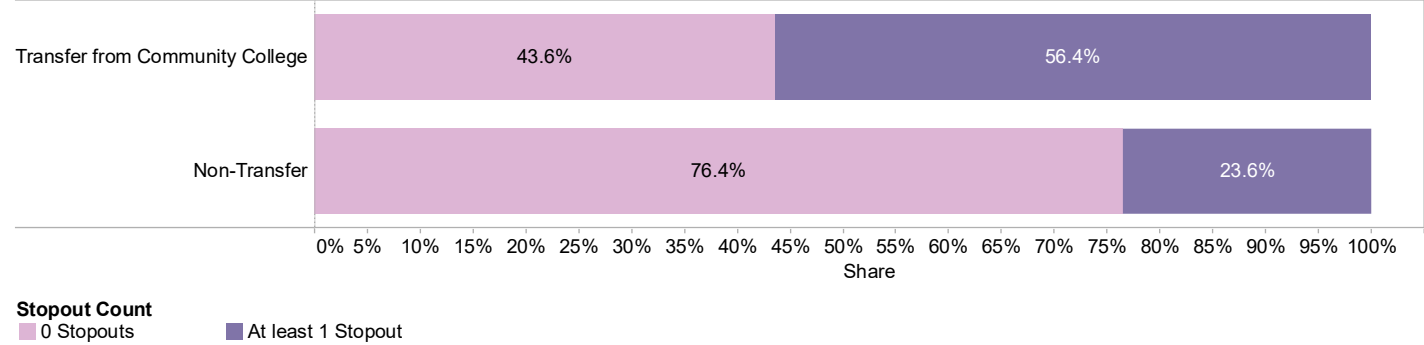


Time to degree among community college transfers was associated with different stopout and enrollment patterns

More than one-quarter of bachelor's degree earners transferred from a community college to a four-year institution before earning their degree (28.4%, 539,000; Figure 1.1 on [Dashboard](#)). To better understand this pathway to bachelor's degree attainment, this section compares the time to degree and enrollment patterns of bachelor's earners who transferred from a community college with those who did not.

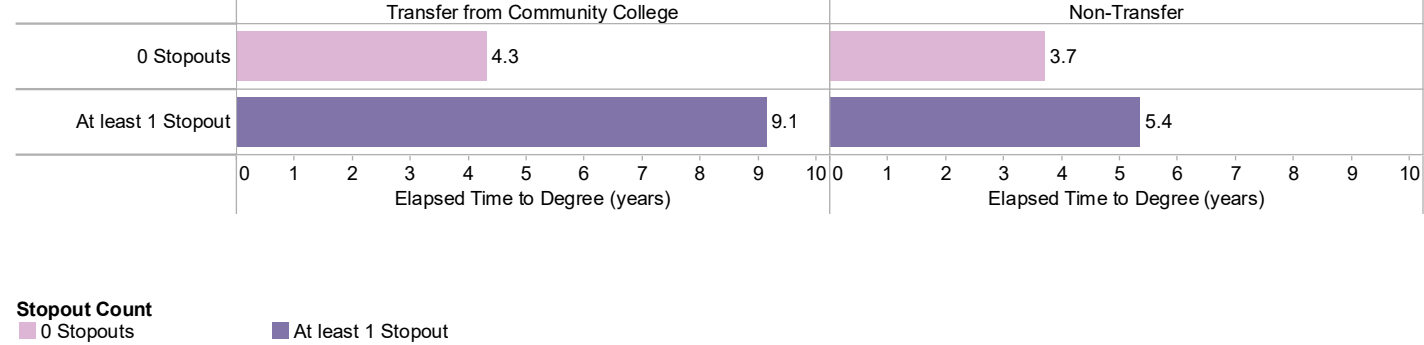
Students who transferred from a community college had a median elapsed time to degree of 5.7 years, compared to 3.7 years for non-transfers (Figure 1.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Transfer students were also more likely to experience enrollment interruptions before earning a bachelor's degree. More than half of community college transfers (56.4%) had at least one stopout, compared to 23.6 percent of non-transfers (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Distribution of Bachelor’s Earner’s by Community College Transfer Status and Stopout Count



For transfer students who did not have any stopouts, their median time to degree was shorter than the overall median for transfer students (4.3 years; Figure 22), whereas those who had at least one stopout took substantially longer to complete a bachelor’s degree compared to the overall transfer median (9.1 years). However, transfers who did not have any stopouts still took longer to complete their degree compared to non-transfers (4.3 versus 3.7 years).

Figure 22. Median Bachelor’s Earners’ Elapsed Time to Degree by Community College Transfer Status



Community college transfers also spent more time actively enrolled before earning a bachelor's degree. Median active enrollment time was 4.7 years for transfer students compared to 3.7 years for non-transfers (Figure 2.1 on [Dashboard](#)). Together, these findings show that bachelor's earners who followed the community college transfer pathway had different enrollment patterns than non-transfers, including higher rates of stopouts and longer elapsed and active enrollment times.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Among first-time degree earners in 2024-25, median time to degree was under four years across credential levels. Students with more continuous pathways—enrolling without a stopout, attending mostly full time, those who were between age 18 and 20 when they started, and completing at their starting institution—typically finished sooner. Many students took longer, particularly when their pathways included stopouts, transfers, earning a credential prior to finishing a bachelor's degree, or changes in where they finished (i.e., institution, sector, or state).

Stopouts were one of the strongest contributors to longer completion times. Students who stopped out took longer overall and often spent more time actively enrolled after returning, suggesting that enrollment interruptions can continue to slow progress even after students re-enroll.

Stopouts also explained much of the variation in time to degree across sectors and student groups. Among students who completed without stopping out, differences across groups were often smaller; among those with one or more stopouts, those differences widened.

While median time to degree was under four years across award types, students followed many different pathways to a credential. Students who experienced stopouts, earned a prior undergraduate award, crossed state lines, transferred or attended multiple institutions generally took longer to complete than students whose educational pathways were more continuous.

By examining both elapsed time and active enrollment time, this report provides a more detailed view of how experiences throughout a student's educational journey are associated with time to degree attainment. Understanding how stopouts and pathway complexity relate to completion timelines can help institutions, policymakers, and researchers identify where students may encounter challenges on the path to a credential and better understand the experiences associated with longer time to degree. These findings demonstrate how student-level data can be used to illuminate the pathways students follow and the factors associated with longer completion timelines.