

2015-16

Undergraduate Degree Earners

REPORT

First-time Graduates and Graduates with Prior Awards

NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE®
RESEARCH CENTER™

The number of students earning their first undergraduate degree in 2015-16 (first-time graduates) was 2,246,233, a decline of 1.4 percent compared to 2014-15 (**Figure 1**). In contrast, the number of graduates earning their second or third undergraduate credential (graduates with prior awards) grew by 1.7 percent to 648,754. The overall number of students who earned an undergraduate degree in 2015-16 was 2,894,987, a 0.7 percent decline from 2014-15.

Overall, fewer first-time college graduates were added to the population in 2015-16, but the trend varies markedly by age group (**Figure 2**). First-time graduates (associate and bachelor's degrees combined) in the 25 and over age group dropped by nearly 49,000 (-7.0 percent) compared to the previous year, reflecting postrecession enrollment declines among older students. However, first-time graduates under the age of 25 saw continued growth in 2015-16, with their numbers having increased by over 18,000 (+1.2 percent) compared to the previous year.

As a share of all undergraduate degree earners, first-time graduates declined from 78.1 percent to 77.6 percent in 2015-16. This continues a recent trend, in which the share of first-time graduates has dropped over half a percentage point per year since 2012-13 (**Figure 3**). For bachelor's degree earners, the most common prior credential level was an associate degree. Of students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2015-16, 76.0 percent were first-time graduates (had no prior award),

3.2 percent had previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 19.5 percent had previously earned an associate degree, and 1.4 percent had previously earned a certificate (**Figure 4**). For associate degree earners, the most common prior credential level was a certificate. Of students who earned an associate degree in 2015-16, 81.0 percent were first-time graduates (had no prior award), 3.6 percent had previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 7.4 percent had previously earned an associate degree, and 8.1 percent had previously earned a certificate (**Figure 5**).

About the Data

Based on student-level enrollment and degree data from the National Student Clearinghouse, the Undergraduate Degree Earners Report differentiates between students earning their first postsecondary award and students earning additional undergraduate awards on top of ones earned in prior years. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary award. In **Figures 1 and 2** only recipients of associate and bachelor's degrees are counted as first-time graduates. However, the prior awards which distinguish first-time graduates from repeat graduates include both degrees and certificates. Counts may differ from those reported in earlier versions of this report, to reflect additional historical data reported to the Clearinghouse since publication. More information on Clearinghouse degree coverage and definitions can be found in the notes section at the end of this report.

Figure 1: Number of First-Time Graduates and Graduates with Prior Awards

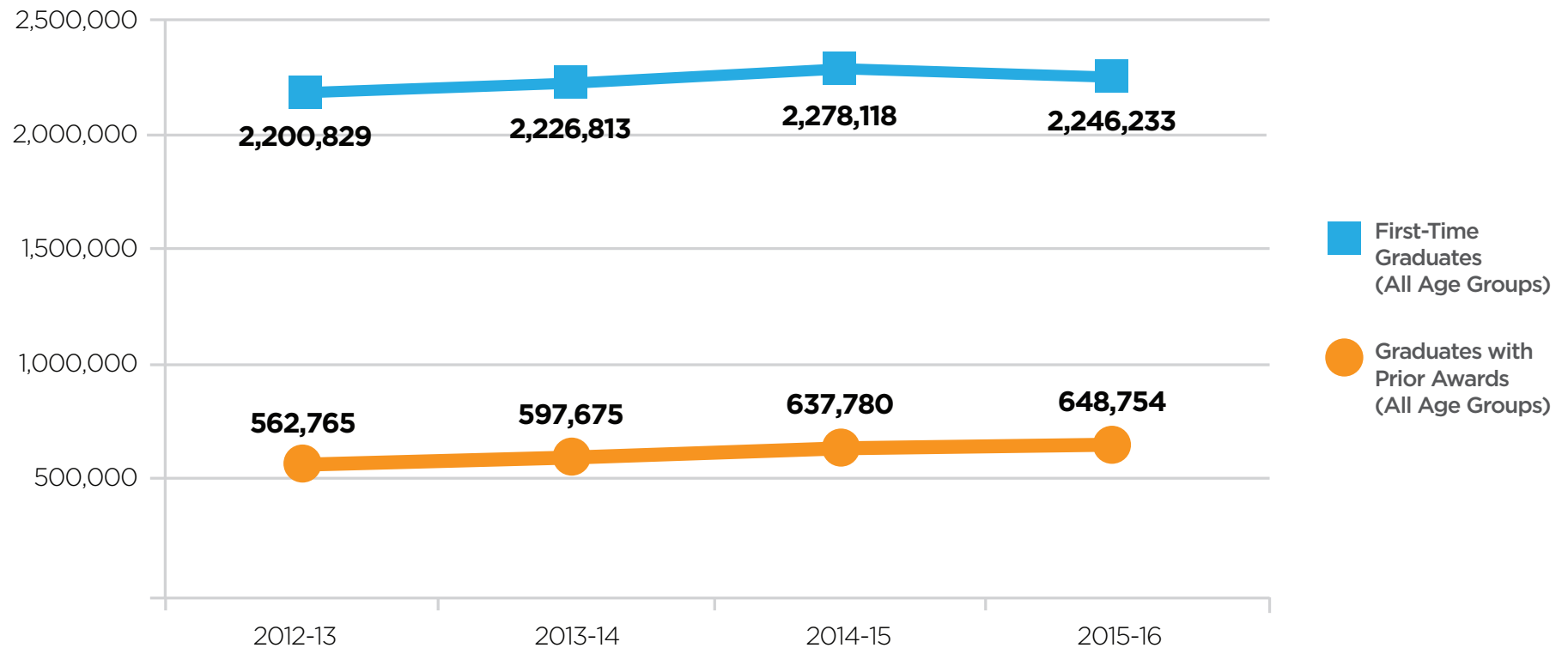


Figure 1 shows counts of students earning undergraduate degrees (bachelor's and associates combined) in each academic year, disaggregated by first-time graduate status. The number of graduates with prior awards (which may include degrees or certificates) has continued a postrecession increase.

Figure 2: Number of First-Time Graduates by Age Group

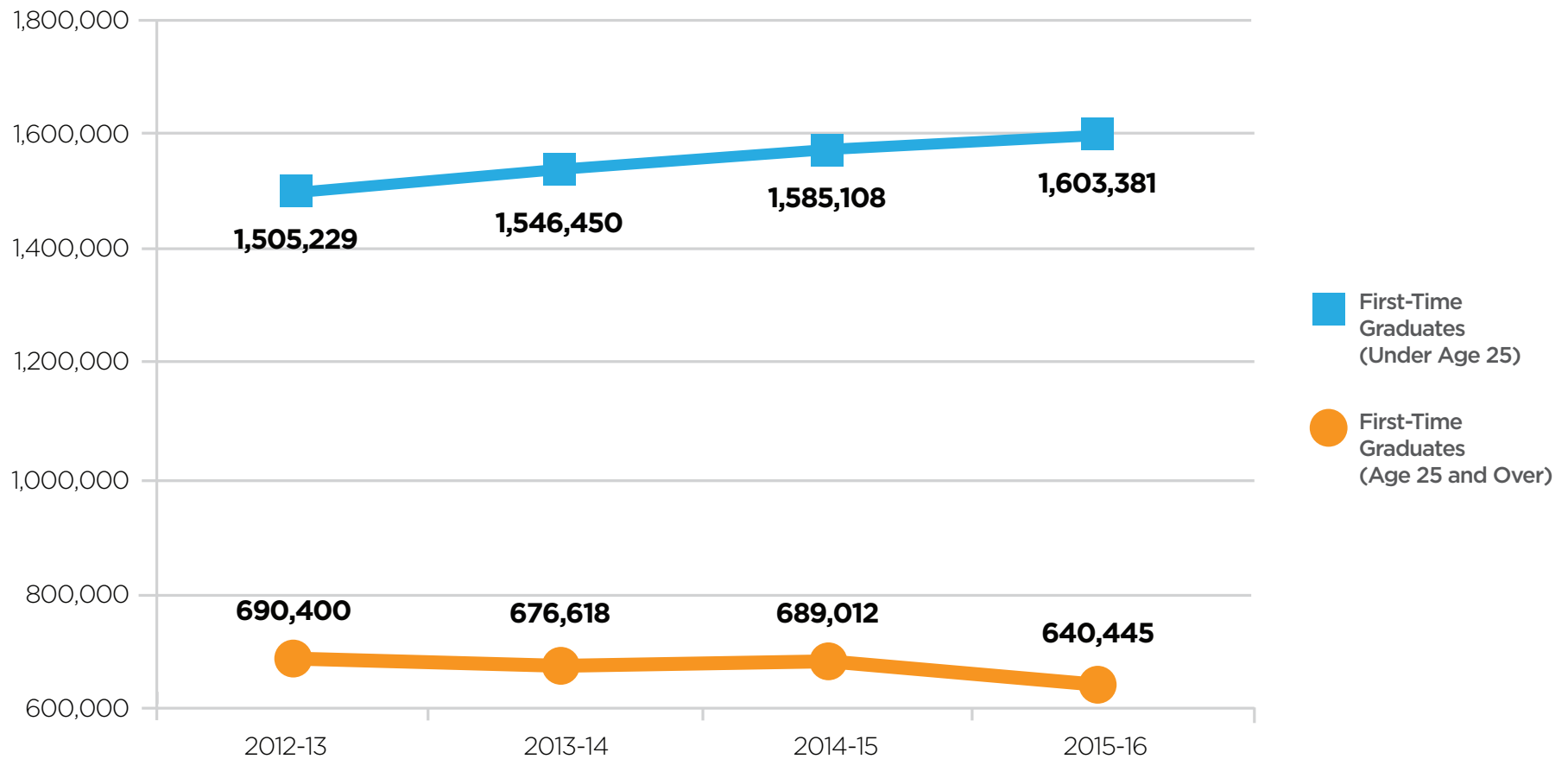


Figure 2 shows counts of students earning undergraduate degrees (bachelor's and associates combined) in each academic year, disaggregated by age group. Since 2012-13, the number of first-time graduates in the 25 and over group has declined by almost 50,000, while the number of first-time graduates in the under 25 category has increased by over 98,000.

Figure 3: Distribution of Undergraduate Degree Earners by Prior Award Status

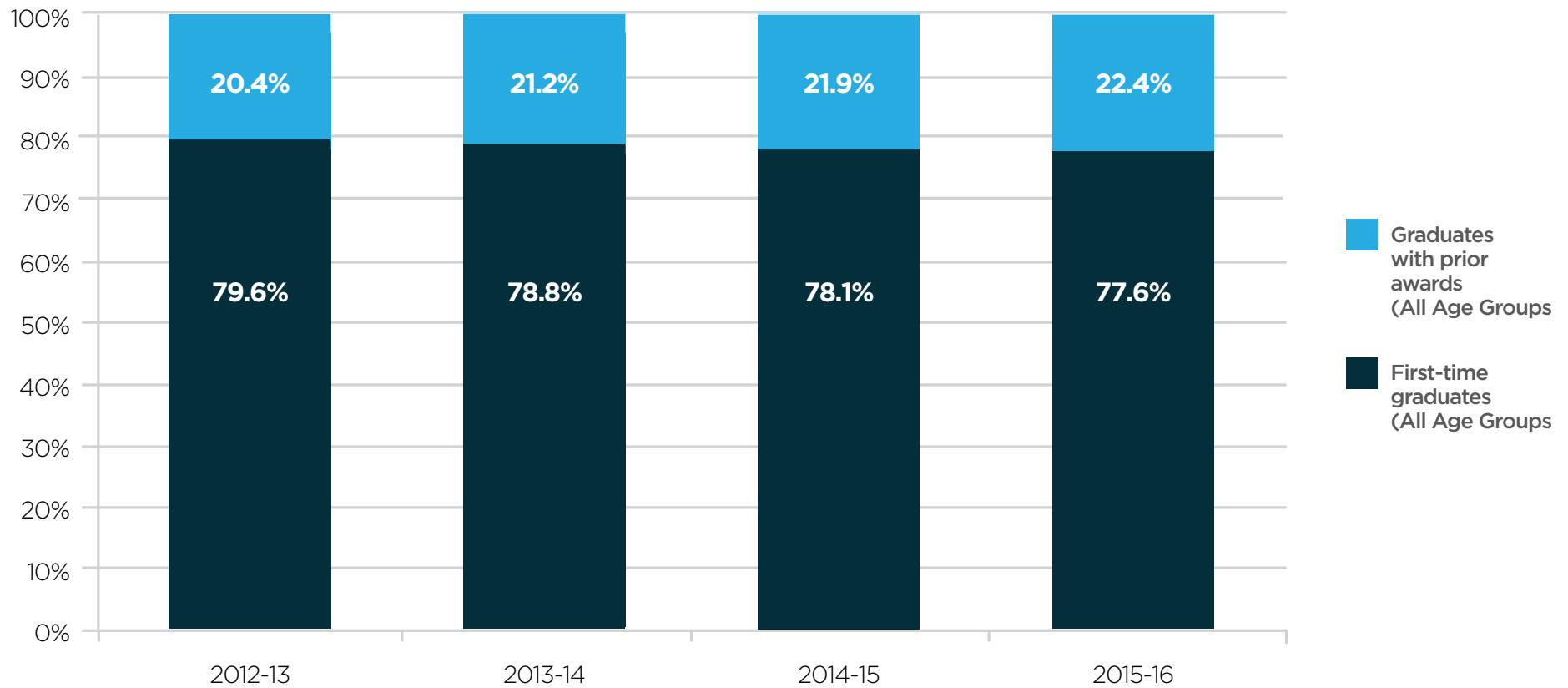


Figure 3 shows that in 2012-13, 20.4 percent of all bachelor's and associate degree recipients were students who had already earned a postsecondary award in a previous year. By 2015-16, students with prior awards accounted for 22.4 percent of all undergraduate degree recipients.

Figure 4: Bachelor's Degree Earners - Distribution of Prior Awards

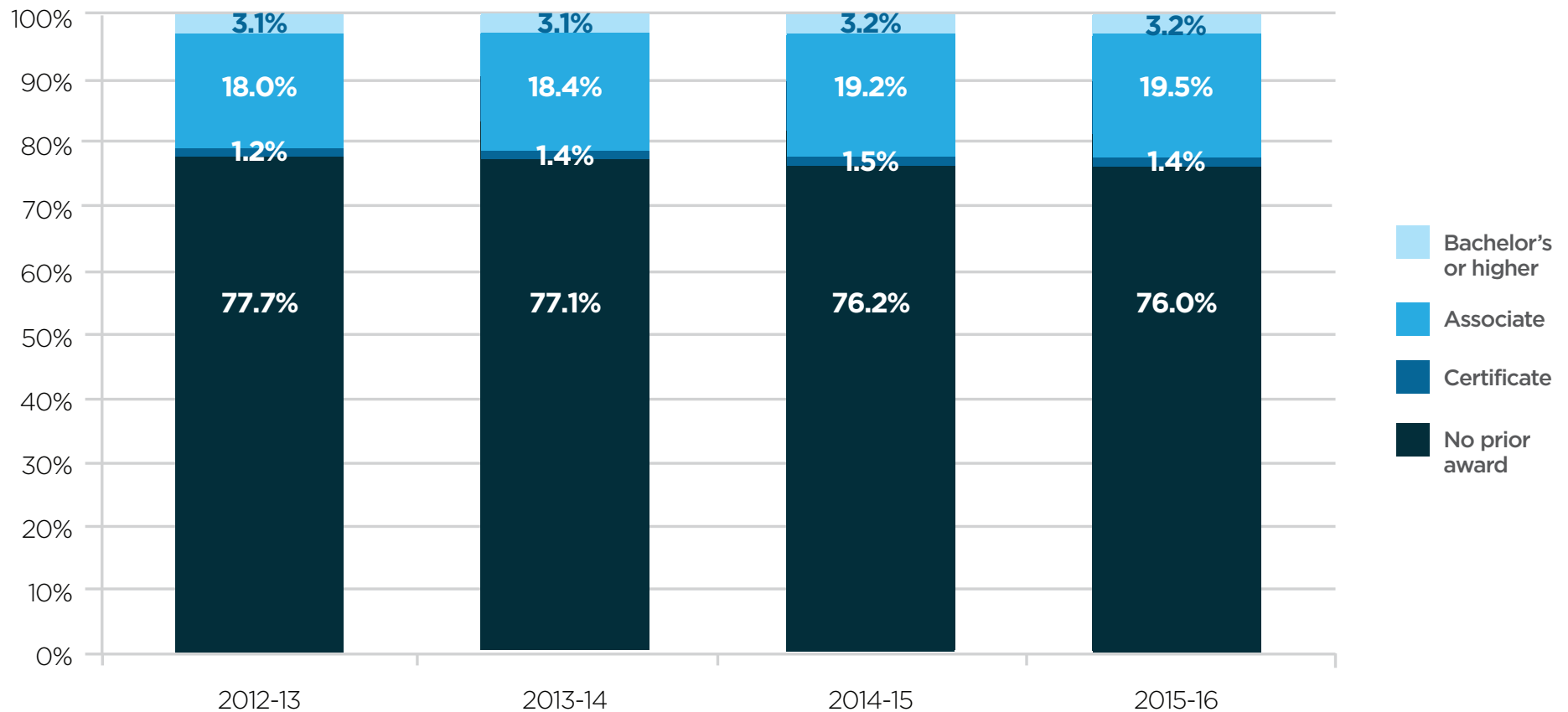


Figure 4 shows the percentage distribution of prior awards for students who earned a bachelor's degree in each of the last four academic years. In 2015-16, 76.0 percent were first-time graduates (had no prior award), 3.2 percent had previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 19.5 percent had previously earned an associate degree, and 1.4 percent had previously earned a certificate.

Figure 5: Associate Degree Earners - Distribution of Prior Awards

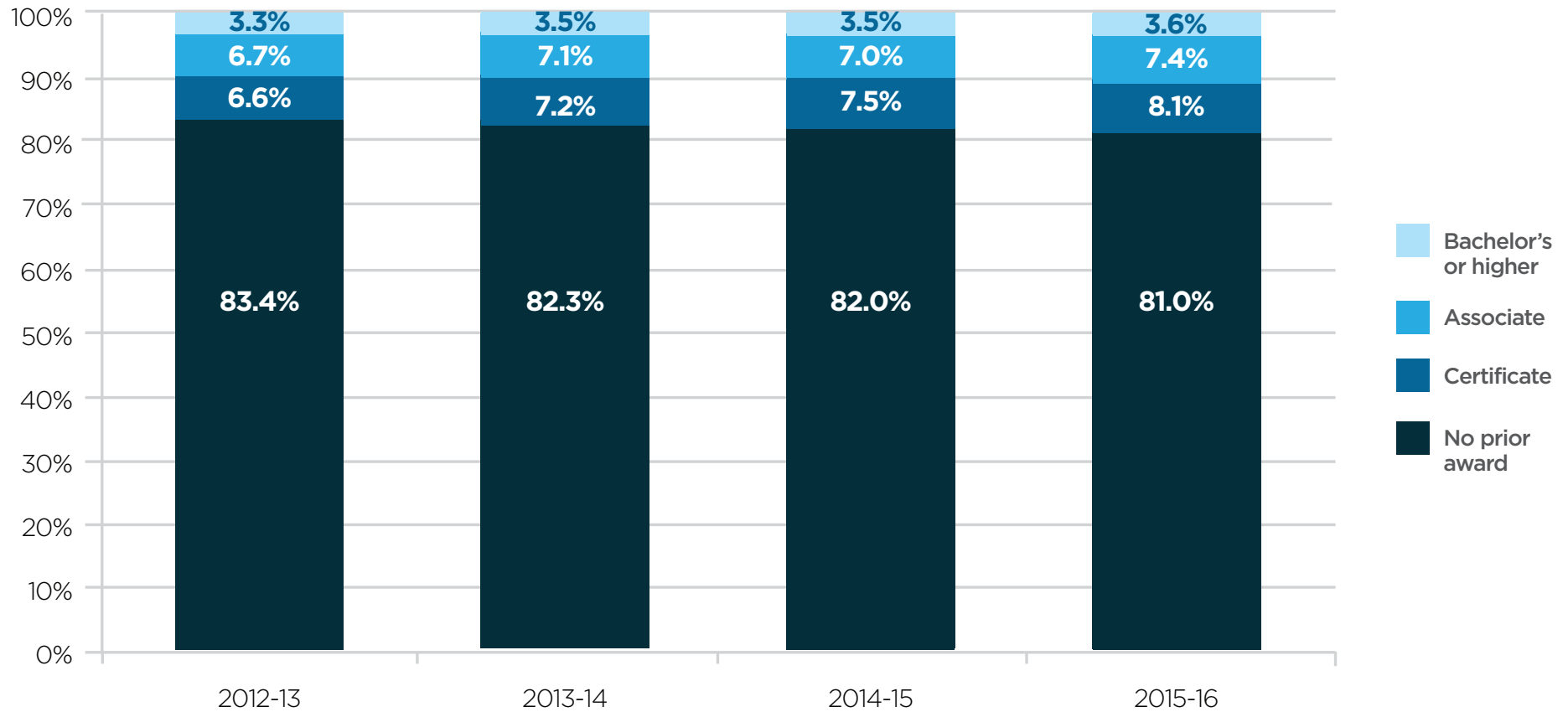


Figure 5 shows the percentage distribution of prior awards for students who earned an associate degree in each of the last four academic years. In 2015-16, 81.0 percent were first-time graduates (had no prior award), 3.6 percent had previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 7.4 percent had previously earned an associate degree, and 8.1 percent had previously earned a certificate.

Table 1: Undergraduate Degree Earners by Level of Prior Award

	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15		2015-16	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
BACHELOR'S DEGREE EARNERS								
Prior Master's	3,235	0.2%	3,330	0.2%	3,658	0.2%	3,724	0.2%
Prior Bachelor's	52,819	2.9%	54,946	2.9%	57,512	3.0%	58,019	3.0%
Prior Associate	329,649	18.0%	347,300	18.4%	372,955	19.2%	381,293	19.5%
Prior Certificate	22,737	1.2%	25,561	1.4%	28,106	1.5%	28,306	1.4%
First-Time Graduates (No Prior Award)	1,426,622	77.7%	1,453,081	77.1%	1,480,315	76.2%	1,489,178	76.0%
Total Bachelor's Degree Earners	1,835,062	100.0%	1,884,217	100.0%	1,942,545	100.0%	1,960,520	100.0%
ASSOCIATE DEGREE EARNERS								
Prior Master's	2,374	0.3%	2,607	0.3%	2,901	0.3%	2,663	0.3%
Prior Bachelor's	28,195	3.0%	30,091	3.2%	31,574	3.2%	30,490	3.3%
Prior Associate	62,220	6.7%	66,398	7.1%	68,111	7.0%	69,068	7.4%
Prior Certificate	61,536	6.6%	67,442	7.2%	72,964	7.5%	75,190	8.1%
First-Time Graduates (No Prior Award)	774,207	83.4%	773,732	82.3%	797,804	82.0%	757,054	81.0%
Total Associate Degree Earners	928,531	100.0%	940,271	100.0%	973,354	100.0%	934,467	100.0%
CERTIFICATE EARNERS								
Prior Master's	9,265	2.4%	10,472	2.6%	10,052	2.5%	9,813	2.6%
Prior Bachelor's	30,651	7.9%	30,838	7.7%	30,634	7.6%	29,357	7.7%
Prior Associate	27,969	7.2%	28,383	7.1%	29,619	7.4%	30,671	8.0%
Prior Certificate	32,479	8.3%	35,493	8.9%	38,017	9.5%	38,928	10.2%
First-Time Graduates (No Prior Award)	290,201	74.3%	294,776	73.7%	292,959	73.0%	274,902	71.7%
Total Certificate Degree Earners	390,564	100.0%	399,963	100.0%	401,281	100.0%	383,671	100.0%

Table 1 provides counts of undergraduate degree earners grouped by the level of their most recent prior award (if any). Students with no prior award are first-time graduates. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30. In this report, certificate refers to undergraduate and graduate-level certificates, since it was not possible for institutions to make this distinction in Clearinghouse data submissions prior to 2013-14. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

Table 2: Count of First-Time Graduates Earning Bachelor's Degrees by Gender, Age, and Institutional Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Bachelor's Degrees	1,426,622	1.1%	1,453,081	1.9%	1,480,315	1.9%	1,489,178	0.6%
GENDER								
Women	758,217	1.0%	770,587	1.6%	785,591	1.9%	786,631	0.1%
Men	599,485	1.7%	614,291	2.5%	627,154	2.1%	630,720	0.6%
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	1,115,790	1.5%	1,142,010	2.3%	1,159,517	1.5%	1,182,673	2.0%
25-29	141,354	-0.3%	142,570	0.9%	145,303	1.9%	143,471	-1.3%
30-39	89,295	1.2%	89,557	0.3%	93,390	4.3%	88,233	-5.5%
40-49	51,926	-1.0%	50,699	-2.4%	51,846	2.3%	47,618	-8.2%
50 and over	26,100	2.8%	26,597	1.9%	28,806	8.3%	26,420	-8.3%
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	916,424	0.9%	932,485	1.8%	938,015	0.6%	957,138	2.0%
4-Year Private Nonprofit	454,701	0.8%	459,197	1.0%	461,283	0.5%	460,370	-0.2%
4-Year Private For-Profit	54,537	9.0%	60,072	10.1%	79,406	32.2%	70,816	-10.8%

Table 2 shows the count of bachelor's degree recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time college graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30.

Table 3: First-Time Graduates Earning Bachelor’s Degrees as Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Earners by Gender, Age, and Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Bachelor’s Degrees as Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Earners	77.7%	-1.0	77.1%	-0.6	76.2%	-0.9	76.0%	-0.2
GENDER								
Women	75.8%	-1.1	74.9%	-0.8	73.7%	-1.2	73.3%	-0.4
Men	80.0%	-0.9	79.5%	-0.5	78.9%	-0.6	78.7%	-0.2
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	88.2%	-0.4	88.0%	-0.3	87.8%	-0.2	87.6%	-0.2
25-29	56.5%	-1.3	55.6%	-0.9	54.5%	-1.1	53.5%	-1.0
30-39	48.3%	-2.0	47.0%	-1.3	45.4%	-1.6	44.0%	-1.4
40-49	57.1%	-2.3	54.4%	-2.7	52.4%	-2.1	50.3%	-2.1
50 and over	62.4%	-2.6	61.3%	-1.1	60.0%	-1.3	58.1%	-1.9
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	77.0%	-1.1	76.3%	-0.6	75.6%	-0.7	75.3%	-0.3
4-Year Private Nonprofit	82.7%	-0.7	82.2%	-0.5	81.7%	-0.5	81.4%	-0.4
4-Year Private For-Profit	58.9%	0.4	59.7%	0.8	59.5%	-0.2	58.5%	-1.0

Table 3 shows the percentage of bachelor’s degree recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor’s degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30.

Table 4: Count of First-Time Graduates Earning Associate Degrees by Gender, Age, and Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Associate Degrees	774,207	-2.7%	773,732	-0.1%	797,804	3.1%	757,054	-5.1%
GENDER								
Women	449,441	-2.5%	449,053	-0.1%	465,671	3.7%	439,153	-5.7%
Men	299,028	-2.4%	300,729	0.6%	308,830	2.7%	295,390	-4.4%
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	389,439	-0.5%	404,440	3.9%	425,591	5.2%	420,708	-1.1%
25-29	133,892	-3.8%	132,542	-1.0%	136,413	2.9%	129,132	-5.3%
30-39	138,566	-4.9%	133,143	-3.9%	134,584	1.1%	120,793	-10.2%
40-49	74,598	-7.1%	68,489	-8.2%	66,259	-3.3%	56,731	-14.4%
50 and over	34,669	-5.1%	33,020	-4.8%	32,410	-1.8%	28,048	-13.5%
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	105,065	-1.0%	108,119	2.9%	116,493	7.7%	114,810	-1.4%
4-Year Private Nonprofit	37,640	-1.0%	37,431	-0.6%	35,858	-4.2%	36,640	2.2%
4-Year Private For-Profit	80,193	-5.0%	71,054	-11.4%	78,875	11.0%	61,525	-22.0%
2-Year Public	509,184	0.1%	513,260	0.8%	520,473	1.4%	508,950	-2.2%

Table 4 shows the count of associate degree recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30

Table 5: First-Time Graduates Earning Associate Degrees as Percentage of All Associate Degree Earners by Gender, Age, and Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Associate Degrees as Percentage of All Associate Degree Earners	83.4%	-1.2	82.3%	-1.1	82.0%	-0.3	81.0%	-0.9
GENDER								
Women	82.0%	-1.3	80.9%	-1.2	80.6%	-0.3	79.5%	-1.0
Men	85.5%	-1.1	84.4%	-1.1	84.0%	-0.4	83.0%	-0.9
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	90.4%	-0.8	89.9%	-0.5	89.8%	-0.1	89.1%	-0.7
25-29	77.0%	-1.4	75.5%	-1.5	75.1%	-0.5	73.8%	-1.3
30-39	75.8%	-1.9	73.6%	-2.2	72.9%	-0.7	71.2%	-1.7
40-49	80.0%	-1.8	77.5%	-2.5	76.0%	-1.5	73.7%	-2.3
50 and over	80.0%	-1.6	77.6%	-2.4	76.5%	-1.2	73.9%	-2.5
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	83.8%	-0.4	83.4%	-0.5	82.7%	-0.6	81.8%	-0.9
4-Year Private Nonprofit	85.4%	-0.4	84.9%	-0.5	84.8%	-0.1	85.8%	1.0
4-Year Private For-Profit	93.4%	-1.0	91.5%	-1.9	89.4%	-2.1	85.8%	-3.6
2-Year Public	81.8%	-1.3	81.1%	-0.7	80.6%	-0.5	80.1%	-0.6

Table 5 shows the percentage of associate degree recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30.

Table 6: Count of First-Time Graduates Earning Certificates by Gender, Age, and Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Certificates	290,201	2.2%	294,776	1.6%	292,959	-0.6%	274,902	-6.2%
GENDER								
Women	162,247	0.2%	161,301	-0.6%	160,013	-0.8%	144,066	-10.0%
Men	118,203	5.6%	124,655	5.5%	125,355	0.6%	123,477	-1.5%
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	129,612	5.7%	135,609	4.6%	140,340	3.5%	135,988	-3.1%
25-29	48,216	1.7%	47,608	-1.3%	48,258	1.4%	45,580	-5.5%
30-39	54,175	0.2%	52,788	-2.6%	50,893	-3.6%	46,841	-8.0%
40-49	34,628	-2.7%	33,845	-2.3%	31,091	-8.1%	27,006	-13.1%
50 and over	22,827	-2.5%	24,244	6.2%	21,670	-10.6%	19,138	-11.7%
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	13,713	8.4%	15,666	14.2%	17,165	9.6%	18,483	7.7%
4-Year Private Nonprofit	1,348	2.8%	2,029	50.5%	1,683	-17.0%	1,550	-7.9%
4-Year Private For-Profit	9,836	7.6%	10,087	2.6%	6,839	-32.2%	7,848	14.8%
2-Year Public	216,377	3.0%	223,948	3.5%	223,324	-0.3%	213,123	-4.6%

Table 6 shows the count of certificate recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30. In this report, certificate refers to undergraduate and graduate-level certificates, since it was not possible for institutions to make this distinction in Clearinghouse data submissions prior to 2013-14. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

Table 7: First-Time Graduates Earning Certificates as Percentage of All Certificate Earners by Gender, Age, and Sector

	2012-13	Change from Prior Year	2013-14	Change from Prior Year	2014-15	Change from Prior Year	2015-16	Change from Prior Year
OVERALL								
First-Time Graduates Earning Certificates as Percentage of All Certificate Earners	74.3%	-1.3	73.7%	-0.6	73.0%	-0.7	71.7%	-1.4
GENDER								
Women	75.0%	-1.6	74.2%	-0.8	73.8%	-0.5	72.2%	-1.6
Men	73.6%	-0.9	73.1%	-0.5	72.1%	-1.0	71.0%	-1.1
AGE GROUP								
Under 25	84.7%	0.2	84.7%	0.0	84.4%	-0.4	83.4%	-0.9
25-29	65.1%	-1.5	64.7%	-0.4	64.6%	-0.1	62.9%	-1.7
30-39	64.9%	-2.7	63.4%	-1.5	62.1%	-1.3	60.3%	-1.8
40-49	72.0%	-2.6	69.3%	-2.8	67.3%	-1.9	64.6%	-2.7
50 and over	74.0%	-2.4	73.1%	-0.9	70.0%	-3.1	68.1%	-1.9
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR								
4-Year Public	48.0%	-0.6	49.5%	1.5	48.5%	-1.0	49.6%	1.1
4-Year Private Nonprofit	33.0%	-0.4	33.8%	0.8	33.6%	-0.2	31.8%	-1.8
4-Year Private For-Profit	71.6%	1.7	74.7%	3.1	69.2%	-5.5	69.3%	0.1
2-Year Public	75.3%	-1.1	74.8%	-0.6	73.8%	-1.0	72.8%	-1.0

Table 7 shows the percentage of certificate recipients in each year and category who were first-time graduates. First-time graduates are defined as students who earned a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or certificate as their first postsecondary credential. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30. In this report, certificate refers to undergraduate and graduate-level certificates, since it was not possible for institutions to make this distinction in Clearinghouse data submissions prior to 2013-14. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

NOTES ON THE DATA

Definition of *First-Time Graduate*

The *Undergraduate Degree Earners Report*, published annually by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, provides counts of first-time graduates and graduates with prior awards by institutional sector, award level, age group, and gender. Award recipients are considered to be first-time graduates if the award received in the report year is their first postsecondary award from a U.S. Title IV, degree-granting institution. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. Academic years run from July 1 to June 30. A student who earned two credentials in the year of his or her first credential is counted under the highest credential level earned in that year. For example, if a student whose first award was a certificate received in December 2015 subsequently received an associate's degree in May 2016, this student would be counted in this report as a first-time graduate at the associate's degree level in academic year 2015-16.

In this report, *certificate* refers to undergraduate and graduate-level certificates, since it was not possible for institutions to make this distinction in Clearinghouse data submissions prior to 2013-14. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

Degree Coverage and Weighting

The National Student Clearinghouse collects graduation information from its participating institutions via two data reporting services: Enrollment Reporting (ER) and DegreeVerify (DV). Enrollment Reporting has slightly higher data coverage rates, but for credentials reported prior to 2013-14, it generally includes only basic completion information, such as graduation indicator and the date of graduation. DV includes enhanced information on completions, including degree title, major, level, and CIP code, and comprised 93 percent of credentials granted by U.S. Title IV degree-granting institutions as of fall 2016. The overall set of undergraduate degree earners for a particular year is based only on awards reported to DV, but prior award status was assigned using records from both ER and DV. In

cases where the prior award did not appear in a DV record (approximately 2.3% of the 2016 bachelors' degree earners, 2.8% of associate degree earners and 2.9% of certificate earners), the level of the prior award was imputed based on the institution level and related enrollment records. To adjust for the DV participation rate, weights were applied to each degree record included in this report. Weights were derived by calculating the inverse of the rate of degree data coverage for each combination of year, institution sector, award level (bachelor's, associate's, or certificate), and student gender. To obtain degree data coverage for each combination of year, sector, and award level, Clearinghouse degree data were compared to IPEDS Completions data for all U.S. Title IV, degree-granting institutions.

Imputation of Gender

Institutions reported student gender to the Clearinghouse for slightly less than half of all students included in this report. The genders of the remaining students were imputed using a table of name-gender pairs that the Research Center developed using data publicly available from the Census Bureau and the Social Security Administration as well as the institution-reported data. The imputation used only those pairs in which the name had at least two instances and was associated with a single gender in at least 95 percent of the instances. The imputation is accurate in 99.6 percent of the cases with known gender. A detailed document on the development of our approach resides on the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's "[Working with Our Data](#)" Web page.

Degree-Granting Status

When referencing IPEDS counts of postsecondary awards, it is important to distinguish degree-granting institutions from non-degree-granting institutions. Clearinghouse certificate and degree data, as well as the IPEDS comparison data used for the weighting calculation in this report, are limited to degrees and certificates awarded by U.S. Title IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions.



*Sponsored in part by the Lumina Foundation,
committed to enrolling and graduating more
students from college.*