

Undergraduate Degree Earners

Academic Year 2020-21



HIGHLIGHTS

- In the 2020-21 academic year, the total number of undergraduate credential earners increased by 1.1 percent or 39,000 to 3.7 million graduates. After a brief standstill in the previous year, graduate numbers began to rise again.
- The latest rebound was led by non-first-time graduates—students earning stacked credentials—who had the largest one-year growth since 2012-13 (+3.9% or +37,800 students). The growth was more pronounced among bachelor's degree recipients (+5.1% or +27,700 students).
- Declines in first-time graduates have stabilized, following an unusually large drop the year prior (-0.9%). Certificate earners continued a downward trend (-2.6%), while baccalaureates continued to increase (+0.7%). Associate degree earners showed signs of rebound (+0.3%) following a major drop the year prior (-3.7%).
- Traditional college-age students under 25 continued to decline in first-time associate degree and certificate completion, the age group comprising the majority of sub-baccalaureate level completers.

The Undergraduate Degree Earners report series, published annually, provides demographic and educational profile data for all students graduating with an undergraduate credential each year. Undergraduate credentials may include associate and bachelor's degrees and certificates.

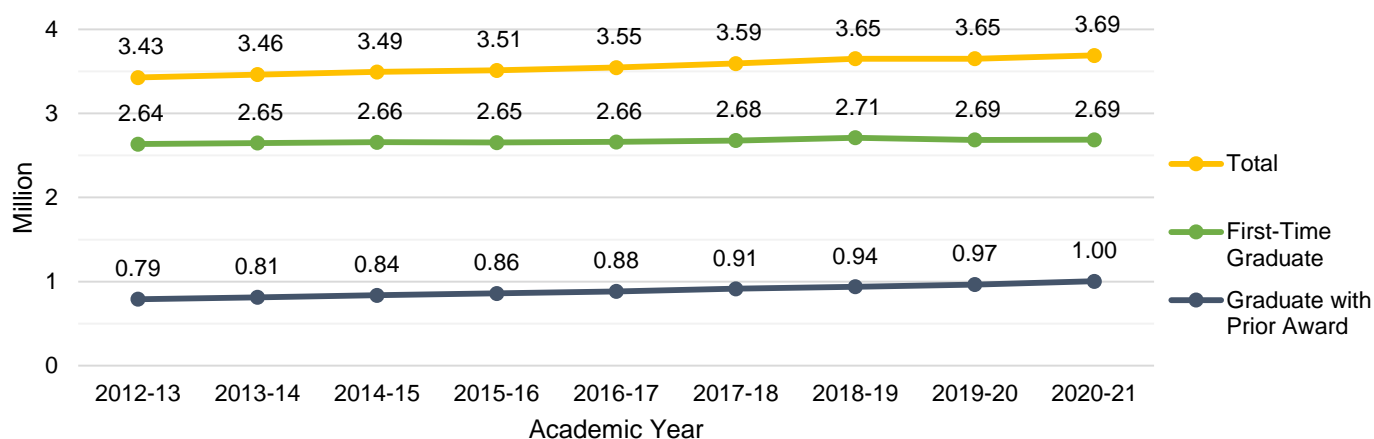
In the current report, we profile graduates in the 2020-21 academic year, with a focus on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and changes in demographics and education credentials received over the last nine academic years, since 2012-13. The [Appendix](#) provides state-level and regional trends, in addition to the national graduate profiles by age and type of credential received.

A total of 3.7 million undergraduate credential earners in the 2020-21 academic year represent a 1.1 percent increase from the previous year, driven by the growth in non-first-time graduates.

The total number of undergraduate credential recipients in 2020-21 grew 1.1 percent from the previous year (+39,000 students), showing signs of rebound from the growth pause in 2019-20 (see **Figure 1**). Undergraduate credential earners had been growing up until the pandemic, with an average growth of 1.1 percent per year from 2012-13 to 2018-19. In 2019-20, there was no growth.

The number of students earning stacked credentials (graduates with prior award) showed the largest one-year growth since 2012-13, up 3.9 percent or 37,800 students from the previous year (see **Appendix**). The graduates with prior award were the driving force of the growth in overall undergraduate credential earners. On the other hand, students earning their first undergraduate credential remained at last year's level, 2.7 million. This suggests no recovery from the initial declines seen at the start of the pandemic.

Figure 1. Overall Undergraduate Credential Earners



Among the 3.7 million undergraduate credential recipients in 2020-21, 72.8 percent were first-time completers (Figure 2), marking a 0.7 percentage point drop from the previous year (73.6%, see Figure 3). This is a continuation of the existing trend, where first-time completers represent a declining share of overall undergraduate credential earners.

Figure 2. 2020-2021 Graduate Profile (N = 3.7M)

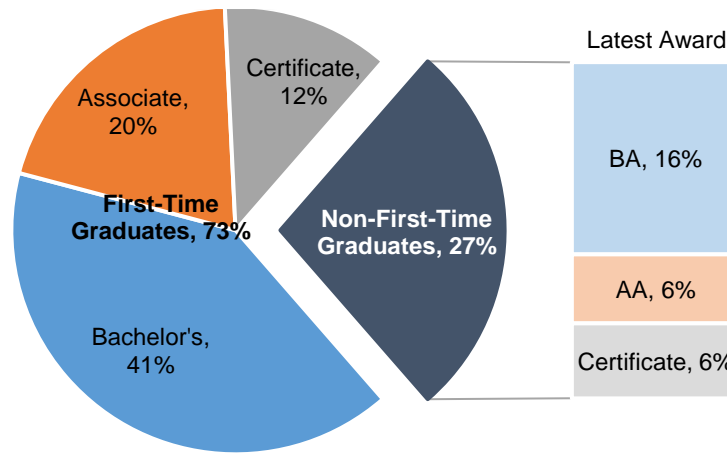
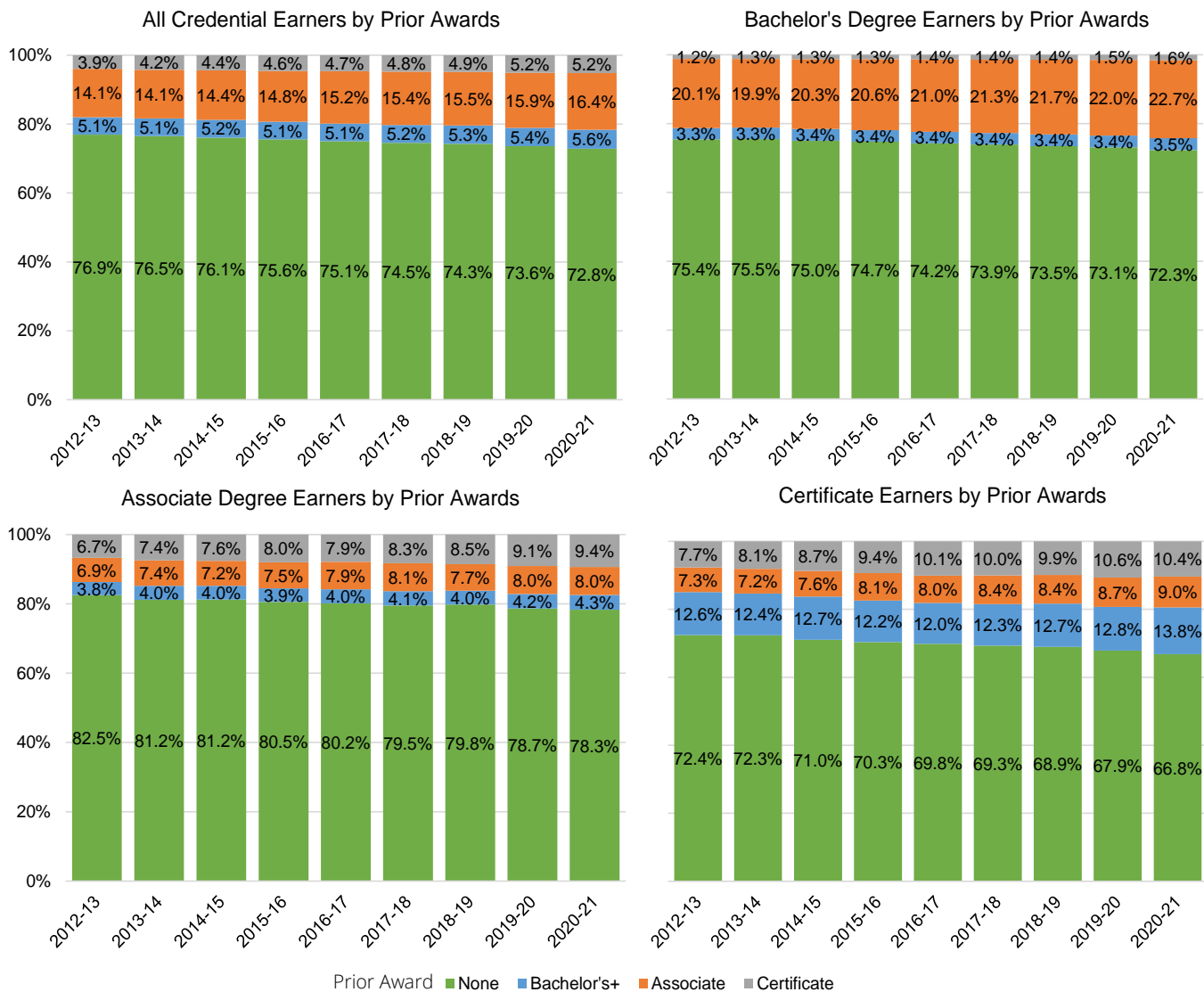


Figure 3. Undergraduate Credential Earners by Current and Prior Awards



The number of non-first-time credential earners increased by 3.9 percent, the largest one-year growth since 2012-13. This growth was driven by students earning a bachelor's degree (5.1%).

The number of non-first-time credential earners increased to over 1 million (up 3.9% or 37,800 students from last year, see Figure 4). In the last five years, this category increased by 2.6-3.4 percent yearly, for a cumulative increase of 16.8 percent since 2015-16, or 144,200 students. Increases in stacked credentials were seen across all credential types. Notably, non-first-time bachelor's degree earners increased by 5.1 percent (+27,700 students), over double last year's increase (2.4%).

The number of bachelor's degree recipients with a prior associate degree continued to increase (+5.0%, +22,000), representing a growing share of new baccalaureates: 22.7 percent (469,000) of bachelor's degree recipients had a prior associate degree, up from 22.0 percent (447,000) last year and 20.6 percent (395,000) five years ago in 2015-16 (Figure 3).

The number of first-time graduates stayed the same, following a large drop the year prior. Certificate earners continued a downward trend (-2.6%), while baccalaureates continued to increase (+0.7%). The number of associate degree earners showed signs of rebound (+0.3%) following a major drop the year prior (-3.7%).

Overall first-time undergraduate credential earners remained unchanged from the previous year, but the patterns differed by credential type. The number of first-time associate degree recipients has been decreasing in the past decade (an average -0.8% decline per year from 2012-13 to 2018-19) with an unprecedented drop in 2019-20 (-3.7%, - 28,000 students). Following last year's large decrease, the number of first-time associate degree earners showed a small rebound (+0.3%, +2,500 students, see Figure 5).

First-time bachelor's degree earners increased by 0.7 percent or 10,600 students. This increase is smaller than the average annual growth (+1.1% per year from 2012-13 to 2018-19). First-time certificate earners continued to decline (-2.6%, 11,800 students).

Figure 4. Non-First-Time Graduates by Type of Award

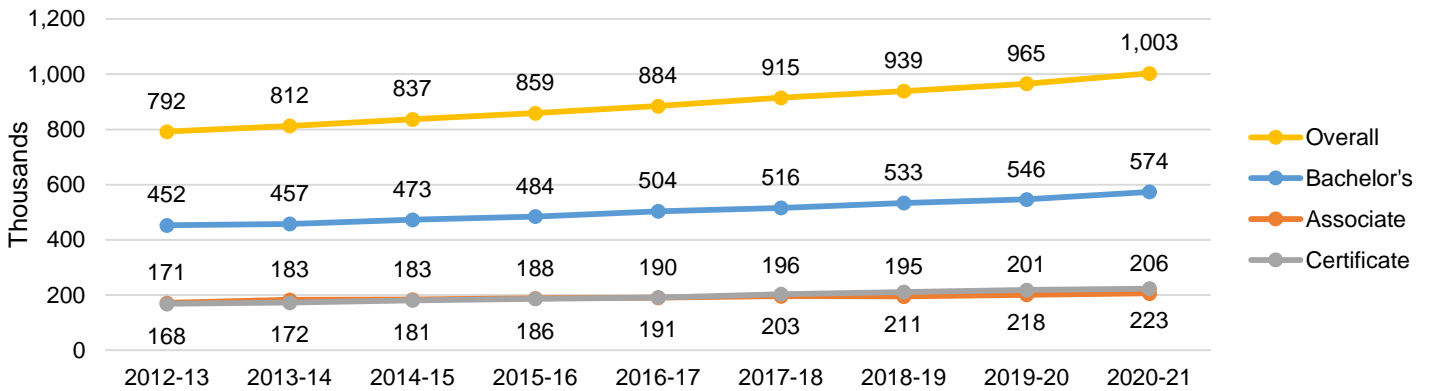
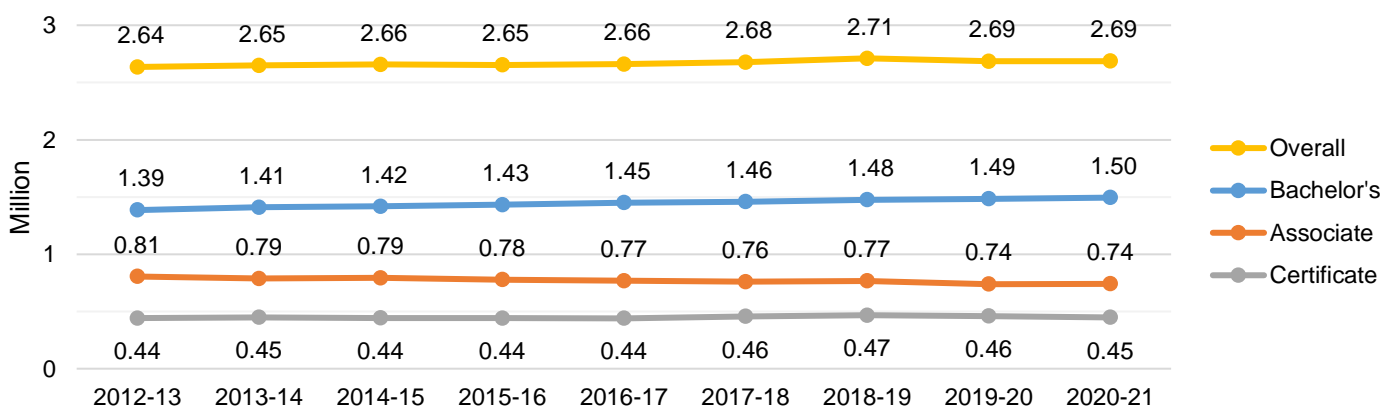


Figure 5. First-Time Graduates by Type of Award

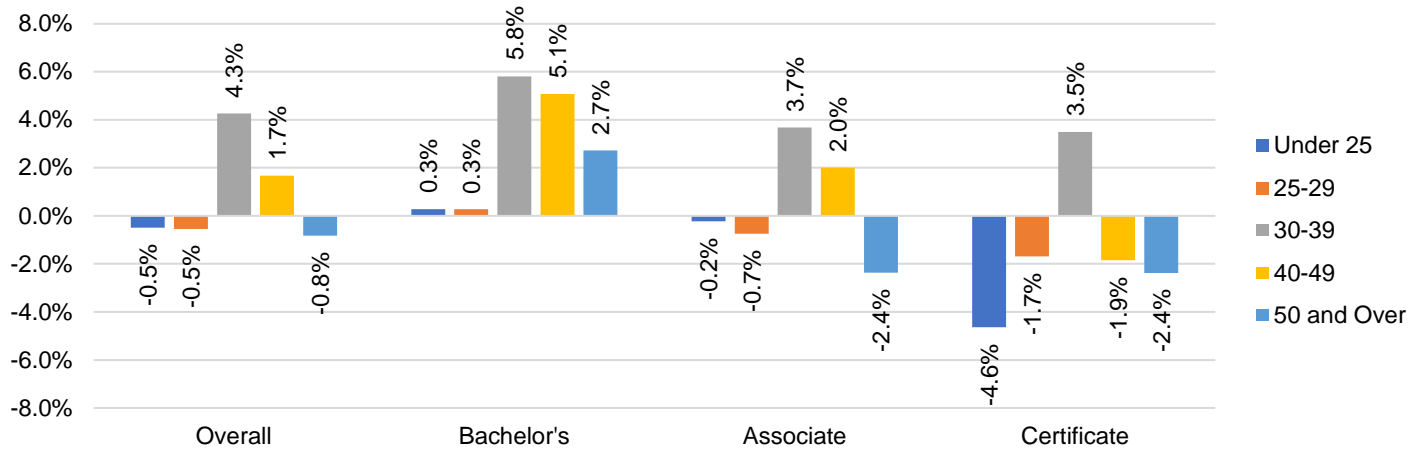


Traditional college-age students under 25 continued to decline in first-time associate degree and certificate completion, the age group comprising the majority of sub-baccalaureate level completers.

The overall number of traditional-age first-time graduates (under 25 at completion) decreased by 0.5 percent or 9,600 fewer graduates (see Figure 6). This is attributable to a slowing growth rate in bachelor’s degree earners (+0.3% or +3,500) and the continuing decrease in sub-baccalaureate level completers (-4.6% or -12,000 for certificates; -0.2% or -1,000 for associate degrees). Traditional-age students make up the vast majority of first-time undergraduate credential earners (72.7% in 2020-21, see Appendix).

In contrast, non-traditional-age first-time graduates (25 and older) increased (+1.4%, +10,350, see Appendix), driven largely by the growth of graduates in their 30s (+4.3%, +10,700, see Figure 6). Despite this growth, students 25 and older earning their first undergraduate credential are still below pre-pandemic levels (see Appendix).

Figure 6. Change in Number of First-Time Graduates by Age at Graduation and Type of Award: 2019-20 to 2020-21



In summary, after the initial standstill in the 2019-20 academic year, the overall number of undergraduate credential earners started to rise (+1.1%), continuing the pre-pandemic upward trend. This year’s growth was fueled by students earning stacked credentials (+3.9%), particularly bachelor’s degree earners—including 22,000 additional baccalaureates with a prior associate degree.

There are notable findings about first-time graduates this year, in contrast to the early pandemic trends. Following an unusually large drop the year prior (-0.9%), the overall number of first-time graduates stabilized this year, remaining at last year’s level. Also, students in their 30s drove the 1.4 percent growth in non-traditional-age students (25+) earning their first undergraduate credential.

Methodological Notes

The *Undergraduate Degree Earners Report* provides a basic demographic and education credential profile for all students who are graduating with an undergraduate-level credential each year, which may include bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, or certificates. In this report, we profile the undergraduate credential earners during the most recent academic year 2020-21, focusing on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and examine change over time in student demographics (gender and age) and credentials attained (AA, BA, or certificates) over the last nine years, since the 2012-13 academic year. Trend data are analyzed for the nation, as well as by state and by region, all of which can be found in the Appendix. All data prior to the most recent year reflects newer and additional data reported to the National Student Clearinghouse since publication.

Definition of First-Time Graduate

Students are considered to be first-time graduates if the credential attained during the reported academic year (July 1 to June 30) is their first postsecondary award from a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. A student who earned two credentials in the academic year of his or her first credential is counted under the highest level of credential attained in that year. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

Degree Data 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 95 percent of credentials granted by Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as of fall 2018. The overall undergraduate credential earner numbers each year are based only on awards reported to DV, but prior award status is determined by records from both ER and DV. In cases where the prior award did not

appear in a DV record (approximately 1.9% of the 2017 bachelors' degree earners, 2.7% of associate degree earners and 2.4% 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 (BA, AA 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 Survey data for all Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

Imputation of Gender

Gender data were reported for over 80 percent of students included in this report. Missing gender data were imputed using a table of name-gender pairs that the Research Center developed using data 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.

Degree-Granting Status

When referencing IPEDS postsecondary awards data, 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 Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

Suggested Citation

Karamarkovich, S., Ryu, M., and Scheetz, A. (June 2022), *Undergraduate Degree Earners Academic Year 2020-21*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

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