

# ***Undergraduate Degree Earners***



The number of students earning an undergraduate credential each year continued to increase from 3.4 million in 2012-13 to 3.7 million in 2018-19, representing a seven-percent growth over the past six years. The steady increase was largely fueled by traditional college-age graduates (age 24 or younger) and graduates who had previously earned a postsecondary credential. As a result, adult learners and first-time graduates decreased as a share of all undergraduate degree earners. The number of first-time graduates grew at only one-sixth the rate of the number of students earning stacked undergraduate credentials over this period.

The *Undergraduate Degree Earners* report series, published annually, provides a demographic and education profile for all students graduating with an undergraduate credential, which may include associate and bachelor's degrees and certificates. In this report, we profile graduates in the 2018-19 academic year, with a focus on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and examine changes in demographics and education credentials received over the last six academic years, since 2012-13. In addition to select findings described below, the Appendix provides the national profiles of undergraduate degree earners by age and type of credential earned, as well as comparisons by state and region.

In 2018-19, the most recent academic year for which data are available, approximately 3.7 million students graduated with an undergraduate credential. The 3.7 million overall degree earner numbers are seven percent greater than the number for 2012-13 (see **Figure 1** in the Appendix). The graduate numbers have grown steadily over the past six years, largely fueled by the increases in traditional college-age graduates ages 24 or younger as well as non-first-time graduates with prior awards.

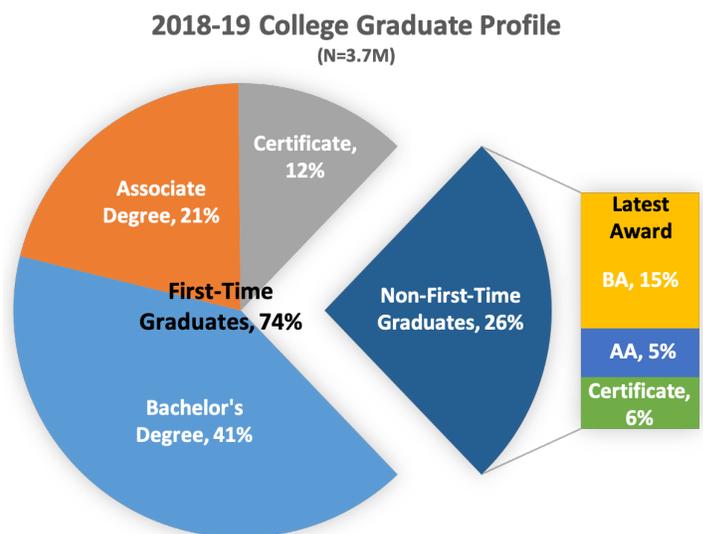
More than one quarter of all undergraduate credentials today are awarded to students who already had one (26% or 943,000 graduates), up three-percentage points from 2012-13 (see **Figure 2**). In fact, the share of first-time graduates has decreased, approximately 0.4 percentage points each year over the last six years. The number of graduates with prior awards grew approximately six times faster than first-time graduate numbers over this period (19% versus 3.4%, as shown in Figure 1).

In addition, a bachelor's degree is becoming increasingly popular regardless of first-time graduate status (see **Table 1**). The number of students earning a bachelor's degree as their first postsecondary completion increased by 8 percent, to 1.5 million, over the past six years, whereas associate degree recipient numbers decreased by 4 percent, to 770,000. Likewise, among graduates with prior awards, six out of every ten earned a bachelor's degree (58%). This includes 440,000 baccalaureate degree recipients who had first completed an associate degree. Students with prior associate degrees constitute 22 percent of all bachelor's degree earners in 2018-19.

First-time undergraduate degree earners are increasingly comprised of more young students and fewer adult learners. Just over the last year, students finishing college for the first time before age 25 increased by 70,000 students or

4 percent. Over the past six years, these traditional college-age first-time graduates increased 18 percent, whereas older graduates decreased by 22 percent. In fact, only this young age group had an increase and all the other age groups saw a decline in first-time graduates over the same period. By region, this young age group, as a share of all first-time graduates, increased notably in the South and the Midwest (from 65% to 74% and from 69% to 76%, respectively, as shown in **Figure 7**).

In summary, the overall undergraduate degree earners are steadily increasing, largely driven by traditional-age graduates and those who had previously earned a credential. First-time graduates continue to decline as a share of all graduates, and they are increasingly comprised of traditional-age learners who are choosing bachelor's over associate degrees. This trend has been consistent over the past few years.



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## Detailed data available in the Appendix

### Figures: Change Over Time (2012-13 to 2018-19)

1. [Overall Undergraduate Degree Earners](#)
2. [Degree Earners by Type of Prior and Current Awards](#)
3. [First-Time Graduates by Type of Award](#)
4. [First-Time Graduates by Age at Graduation](#)
5. [Percent Change in First-Time Graduates by Type of Award and Age at Graduation](#)
6. [Adult Learners Earning Bachelor's or Associate Degrees \(Aged 40+\) by Type of Prior Awards](#)
7. [Degree Earners by Region and Age at Graduation](#)

### Tables: Change Over Time (2012-13 to 2018-19)

1. [Overall Undergraduate Degree Earners by Type of Prior and Current Awards](#)
2. [First-Time Graduates by Type of Award, Gender, Age at Graduation, and Awarding Institution Type](#)
3. [Degree Earners by Region and Age at Graduation](#)

### By State

4. [Total Number of BA and AA Degree Earners by First-Time Graduate Status](#)
5. [BA Degree Earners by First-Time Graduate Status](#)
6. [AA Degree Earners by First-Time Graduate Status](#)

*Data for 2012-2017 are revised and differ from those shown in past editions of this report. Revision reflects newer and additional data reported to the Student Clearinghouse since publication.*

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## Methodological Notes

### 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. For example, if a student whose first award was a certificate received in December 2018 subsequently received an associate degree in May 2019, this student would be counted in our report as a first-time graduate earning an associate degree in the academic year 2018-19. 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 94 percent of credentials granted by Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as of fall 2017. 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 2.2% of the 2016 bachelors' degree earners, 2.8% of associate degree earners and 2.8% 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 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 completions survey 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.

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## Suggested Citation

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