

# Persistence and Retention

*Fall 2019 Beginning Cohort*

July 2021

**Seventy-four percent of first-time freshmen in fall 2019 returned to college for their second year. This rate represents a pandemic-related, unprecedented one-year drop of two percentage points in this important early student success indicator.**

The *Persistence and Retention* report series examines first-year persistence and retention rates for beginning postsecondary students. Persistence rate is measured by the percentage of students who return to college at *any* institution for their second year, while retention rate represents the percentage of students who return to *the same* institution. Students attaining a credential in their first year are accounted for in persistence and retention rates. The report is designed to help institutions understand trends and patterns in this important early success indicator, and identify disparities by institutional type, state, degree level, starting enrollment intensity, major field, and student demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and race and ethnicity.

## National Highlights

- There was a marked decline in first-year persistence rate in fall 2020 after remaining stable for the past four years. The overall persistence rate dropped two percentage points (pp) to 73.9 percent for fall 2019 beginning college students, its lowest level since 2012. Community colleges showed the steepest persistence rate decline over last year of all institution sectors (-3.5 pp to 58.5%).
- Retention rates declined the most in the community college sector (-2.1 pp to 51.6%) whereas the rates went up in the public four-year college sector (+0.7 pp to 76.3%).
- The overall first-year persistence rate fell the most among Latinx students (-3.2 pp to 68.6%).
- Freshmen transferring out in their first year dropped somewhat more than those remaining at their starting institution (-1.2 pp vs. -0.7 pp). This pattern reflects constrained student mobility during the pandemic as documented in our [COVID-19 transfer report](#).
- Bachelor's degree-seeking students majoring in liberal arts, one of the most popular majors for four-year college freshmen, had the largest persistence rate drop (-1.6 pp to 88.1%). Biological and biomedical sciences and health care majors increased 1.4 and 1.8 pp to 82.3 and 78.9 percent, respectively, in their retention rates.

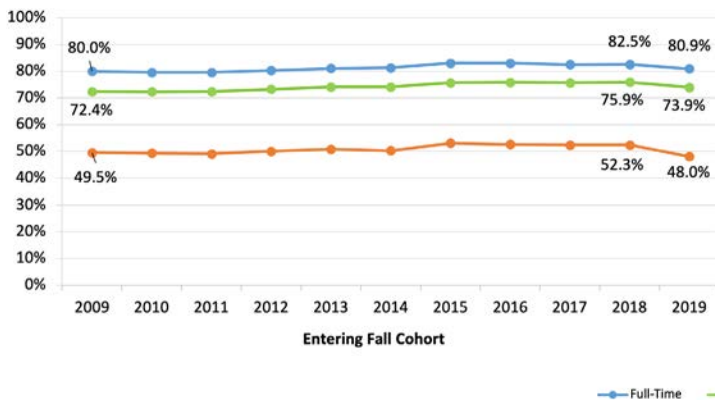
# Overall Persistence and Retention Rates

Of the 2.6 million people who entered college as first-time freshmen in fall 2019, 73.9 percent persisted at any U.S. institution by fall 2020 (Figure 1a). This rate was 2 percentage points (pp) lower than the previous cohort (75.9%), the largest one-year persistence rate drop in the decade since the 2009 cohort, when reporting began. The retention rate—the proportion of the beginning cohort who returned for their second year or earned a credential in the first year at their starting institution—also saw its largest decline (-0.7 pp), dropping to 66.2 percent (Figure 1b). Both are unprecedented declines in these important early indicators of student success.

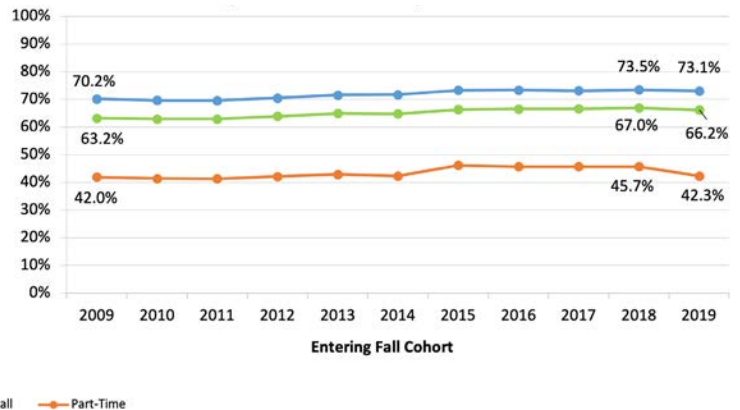
Over the last decade, an average of 9.2 percent of freshmen transferred to a different institution by the second fall. The transfer-out rate declined to 7.7 percent for the 2019 cohort. The average transfer-out rate was higher for students who first entered as full-time (9.6%) than for those who began as part-time (7.5%). Likewise, for the 2019 cohort, full-time entrants were more likely to transfer out than their part-time counterparts (7.8% and 5.7%, respectively). The decline in transfer-out rates accounted for most of the decline in first-year persistence for the 2019 cohort. Retention rates fell less sharply.

Those who returned for their second fall were no more likely to have changed their enrollment intensity in fall 2020 than in 2019, remaining at approximately 16 percent of those who persisted. Our findings that fall 2019 starters have not dropped their course load in fall 2020 in light of the pandemic do not support predictions for the negative effects of the pandemic on student course load.

**Figure 1a.** Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: All Institutions



**Figure 1b.** Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: All Institutions



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall	Retention	63.2%	62.9%	62.9%	63.9%	65.0%	64.9%	66.3%	66.5%	66.7%	67.0%	66.2%
	Persistence	72.4%	72.3%	72.3%	73.2%	74.1%	74.1%	75.6%	75.8%	75.6%	75.9%	73.9%
Full-Time	Retention	70.2%	69.7%	69.6%	70.5%	71.5%	71.7%	73.3%	73.4%	73.2%	73.5%	73.1%
	Persistence	80.0%	79.6%	79.5%	80.2%	81.0%	81.3%	83.0%	83.0%	82.4%	82.5%	80.9%
Part-Time	Retention	42.0%	41.4%	41.3%	42.1%	42.9%	42.3%	46.2%	45.7%	45.7%	45.7%	42.3%
	Persistence	49.5%	49.3%	49.1%	50.0%	50.8%	50.2%	53.1%	52.6%	52.3%	52.3%	48.0%

Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

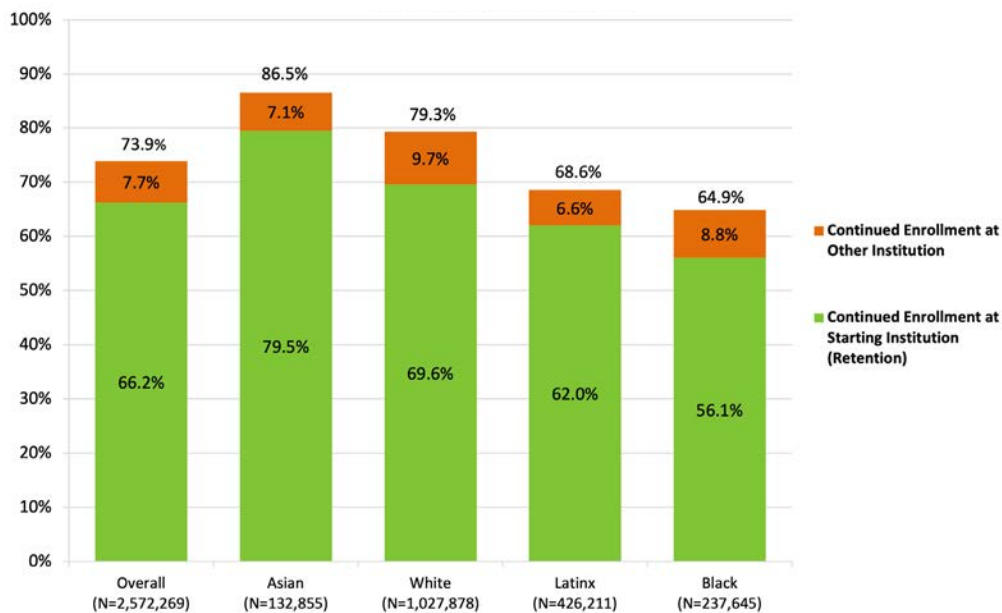
## Disparities by Race and Ethnicity

The persistence rate gaps by race and ethnicity in the 2019 cohort remain as wide as in the previous cohort years, with a 22 pp gap between the highest (86.5% for Asian students) and the lowest (64.9% for Black students). White (79.3%) and Latinx (68.6%) students reflect a gap of nearly 11 pp (**Figure 2**).

Most students who persisted returned to their starting institution regardless of race and ethnicity. However, relative to Asian (7.1%) and Latinx students (6.6%), White and Black students were more likely to transfer out during their first year (9.7% and 8.8%, respectively).

The Latinx persistence and retention rates declined the steepest of all four groups examined in the 2019 cohort. Compared with last year, Latinx students saw a 3.2 pp drop in their persistence rate while White, Asian, and Black students' rates all declined by less than half of that. The Latinx transfer-out rate also fell precipitously (-1.7 pp to 6.6%), currently ranked the lowest among the four groups. Asian students, with the highest persistence rate, recorded the lowest transfer-out rate prior to the pandemic. The Latinx retention rate also declined the most of all groups (-1.5 pp).

**Figure 2.** Persistence and Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity: All Institutions



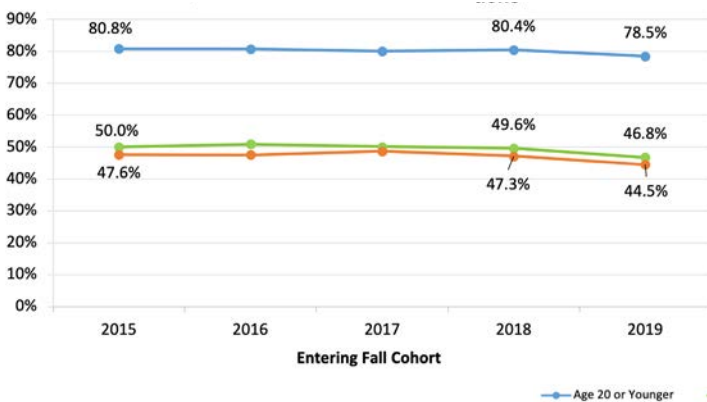
Note: Race and ethnicity data was reported for 83 percent of the students in the fall 2019 entering cohort. Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

# Disparities by Age at College Entry

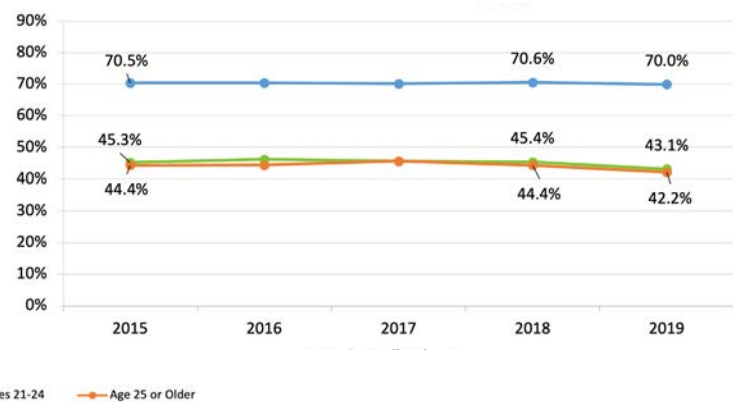
First-year persistence and retention rates differ considerably by the age at which students enter college. In the fall 2019 cohort, students aged 20 or younger had the highest persistence and retention rates, at 78.5 percent and 70 percent, respectively (Figures 3a and 3b). Older students' rates were approximately 30 pp lower (46.8% and 43.1%, respectively, for students aged 21-24 and 44.5% and 42.2%, respectively, for age 25 and older). The transfer-out rate is also much higher for traditional college-age students (age 20 or younger, 8.4%) than for older students (3.7% and 2.4% for those age 21-24 and those 25 and older, respectively).

Persistence rate gaps by age grew wider in fall 2020, mostly due to a larger drop in the transfer-out rate for younger students. The retention rate for traditional age freshmen slipped 0.6 pp from last year, but the persistence rate fell by 2 pp, as the transfer-out rate declined at twice the rate of older students (-1.3 pp, compared to -0.6 pp for age 21-24 or -0.5 pp for age 25 and older). Transfer-out rate declines in previous years were less than 0.5 pp for all age groups.

**Figure 3a. Persistence Rates by Age Group at Entry: All Institutions**



**Figure 3b. Retention Rates by Age Group at Entry: All Institutions**



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Age 20 or Younger	Retention							70.5%	70.4%	70.2%	70.6%	70.0%	
	Persistence				Unavailable			80.8%	80.7%	80.1%	80.4%	78.5%	
Age 21-24	Retention	Reliable credential-level information became available in 2015. From 2015 onwards, students with identified graduate enrollments were removed, and dataset only accounts for undergraduate students. Therefore, information from Fall 2009 to Fall 2014 is not directly comparable to subsequent cohorts, and is not shown.							45.3%	46.2%	45.6%	45.4%	43.1%
	Persistence	Reliable credential-level information became available in 2015. From 2015 onwards, students with identified graduate enrollments were removed, and dataset only accounts for undergraduate students. Therefore, information from Fall 2009 to Fall 2014 is not directly comparable to subsequent cohorts, and is not shown.							50.0%	50.9%	50.2%	49.6%	46.8%
Age 25 or Older	Retention							44.4%	44.4%	45.7%	44.4%	42.2%	
	Persistence							47.6%	47.6%	48.8%	47.3%	44.5%	

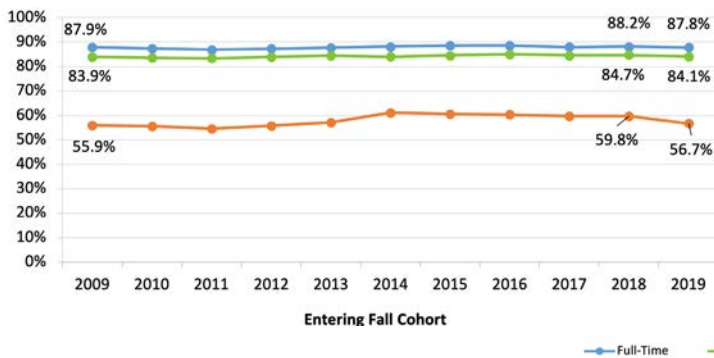
Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Starting at Public Four-Year Institutions

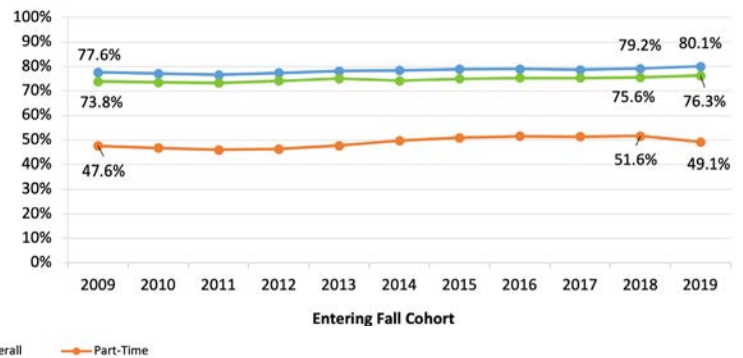
The persistence rate dipped 0.6 pp to 84.1 percent from last year, with this decline more pronounced in students starting as part-time (-3.1 pp compared to -0.4 pp for full-time counterparts; **Figure 4a**). The overall first-year persistence rate drop for the public four-year college starters is due to transfer-out rate declines. This pattern reflects constrained student mobility during the pandemic as documented in our [COVID-19 transfer report](#).

Continuing the trend from the recent past, the first-year retention rate grew at public four-year institutions (from 75.6% in 2018 to 76.3% in 2019; **Figure 4b**). This growth was due largely to a nearly 1 pp retention rate increase for full-time starters, who comprise most (89%) of the cohort for this sector; the rate for their part-time counterparts dropped 2.4 pp. In the previous year, both full-time and part-time starters at public four-year colleges increased slightly in their retention rates (+0.5 and +0.3 pp, respectively). This change demonstrates the differential impact the pandemic has had on the fall 2019 public four-year college freshmen by starting enrollment intensity. Consistent with the prior cohorts, approximately 11 percent of fall 2019 beginning students in the public four-year sector who persisted have increased or reduced their enrollment intensity by fall 2020.

**Figure 4a.** Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Four-Year Institutions



**Figure 4b.** Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Four-Year Institutions



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>Overall</b>	Retention	73.8%	73.5%	73.3%	74.1%	75.0%	74.2%	75.0%	75.3%	75.3%	75.6%	76.3%
	Persistence	83.9%	83.6%	83.3%	84.0%	84.5%	84.0%	84.6%	84.9%	84.6%	84.7%	84.1%
<b>Full-Time</b>	Retention	77.6%	77.1%	76.6%	77.4%	78.2%	78.4%	78.9%	79.0%	78.7%	79.2%	80.1%
	Persistence	87.9%	87.3%	86.9%	87.3%	87.7%	88.2%	88.6%	88.6%	88.0%	88.2%	87.8%
<b>Part-Time</b>	Retention	47.6%	46.7%	45.9%	46.3%	47.7%	49.8%	50.9%	51.5%	51.3%	51.6%	49.1%
	Persistence	55.9%	55.6%	54.5%	55.8%	57.2%	61.1%	60.6%	60.3%	59.8%	59.8%	56.7%

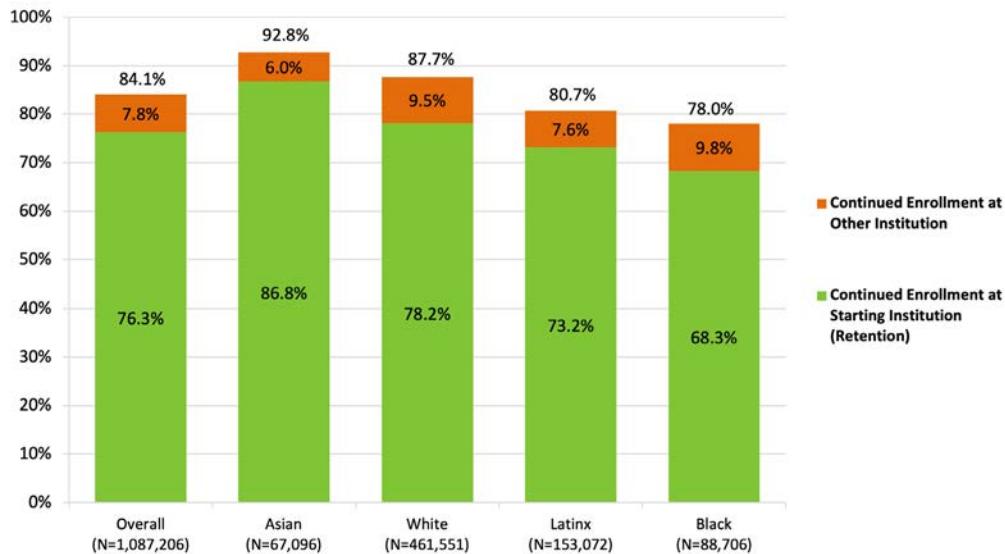
Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Racial and Ethnic Disparities at Public Four-Year Institutions

Persistence rate differences by race and ethnicity are largely consistent with past cohorts, with the rates for Asian (92.8%) and White (87.7%) students faring better than their Latinx (80.7%) and Black (78%) counterparts (**Figure 5**). However, there was a considerable decrease year over year in the Latinx persistence rate (-1.3 pp), in comparison to their Asian, White, and Black peers whose rates dropped no more than 0.3 pp. In the previous year, Latinx public four-year college starters actually increased the most in their persistence rate between the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (+0.5 pp).

Black freshmen retention rates at public four-year colleges increased the most over the 2018 cohort of the four racial and ethnic groups examined (+1.8 pp), while their Asian, White, and Latinx counterparts all increased by less than half of that. However, Black students still have the lowest persistence and retention rates of these four groups, though their relative gaps are smaller compared to other institution sectors.

**Figure 5.** Persistence and Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity: Public Four-Year Institutions



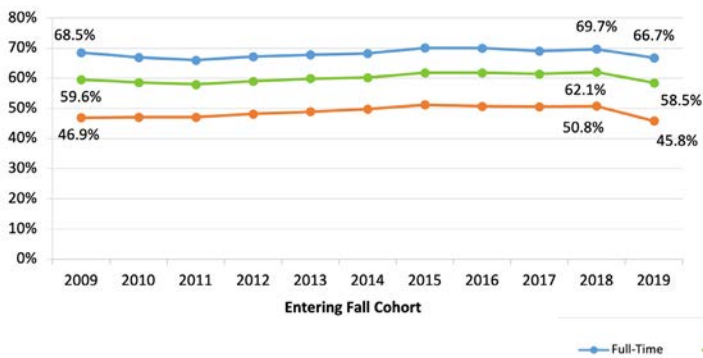
*Note:* Race and ethnicity data was reported for 83 percent of the fall 2019 cohort students in this sector. Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Starting at Public Two-Year Institutions

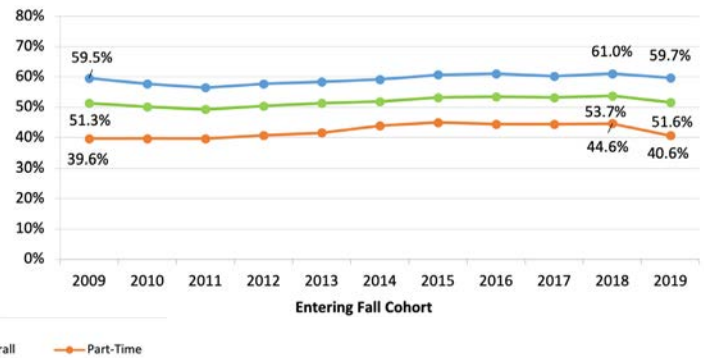
Following slight gains made in both persistence and retention rates at community colleges in the prior year cohort (both rates increased by 0.6 pp between the 2017 and 2018 cohorts), the 2019 beginning cohort in this sector saw severe and unprecedented one-year decreases (-3.5 pp and -2.1 pp to 58.5% and 51.6%, respectively; see **Figures 6a and 6b**). These decreases were most acute for beginning part-time students, who experienced declines of 5 pp and 4 pp in their persistence and retention rates, respectively, after remaining stable a year ago (+0.2 pp). Consistent with the prior cohorts, approximately 31 percent of fall 2019 beginning students at a community college who persisted have increased or reduced their enrollment intensity by fall 2020.

Of all students starting at community colleges in fall 2019, 51.6 percent returned to the same institution by the following fall and 6.9 percent continued enrollment at a different institution. In 2015, these numbers were 53.2 percent and 8.6 percent, respectively. Compared with last year, transfer-out rates declined more for full-time starters than those entering as part-time (-1.6 and -1 pp, respectively).

**Figure 6a.** Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Two-Year Institutions



**Figure 6b.** Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Two-Year Institutions



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>Overall</b>	Retention	51.3%	50.2%	49.3%	50.4%	51.3%	51.9%	53.2%	53.4%	53.2%	53.7%	51.6%
	Persistence	59.6%	58.7%	57.9%	59.0%	59.9%	60.2%	61.9%	61.8%	61.4%	62.1%	58.5%
<b>Full-Time</b>	Retention	59.5%	57.7%	56.5%	57.7%	58.4%	59.1%	60.7%	61.0%	60.2%	61.0%	59.7%
	Persistence	68.5%	66.9%	66.0%	67.2%	67.8%	68.3%	70.1%	70.0%	69.0%	69.7%	66.7%
<b>Part-Time</b>	Retention	39.6%	39.6%	39.6%	40.7%	41.6%	43.8%	45.0%	44.4%	44.4%	44.6%	40.6%
	Persistence	46.9%	47.1%	47.1%	48.1%	48.9%	49.8%	51.2%	50.7%	50.6%	50.8%	45.8%

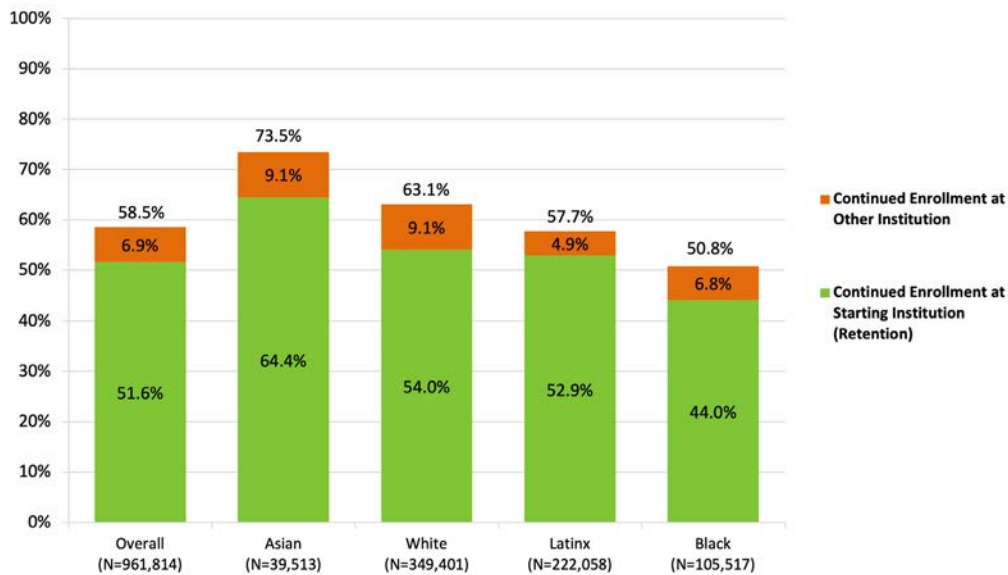
Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Racial and Ethnic Disparities at Public Two-Year Institutions

The Asian and White persistence rate gap at community colleges is still the largest of all institution sectors, and the gap has widened from last year, from 9 to 10.4 pp (73.5% vs. 63.1%, respectively; see **Figure 7**). Black students have the lowest persistence rate at community colleges (50.8%), a trend that has remained unchanged over time. Latinx starters at community colleges declined more year over year in fall 2020 than other racial and ethnic groups examined in both persistence (-4.8 pp) and retention (-3.3 pp), after having remained stable in the recent past.

Approximately 7 percent of students who entered a community college transferred to a different institution in their first year. Notably, transfer-out rates are far lower among Latinx and Black students (4.9% and 6.8%, respectively) compared to White and Asian students (9.1% for both groups).

**Figure 7.** Persistence and Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity: Public Two-Year Institutions



Note: Race and ethnicity data was reported for 85 percent of the fall 2019 cohort students in this sector. Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

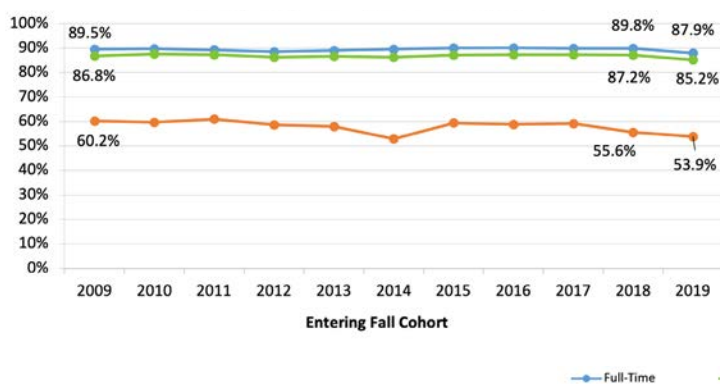


## Starting at Private Nonprofit Four-Year Institutions

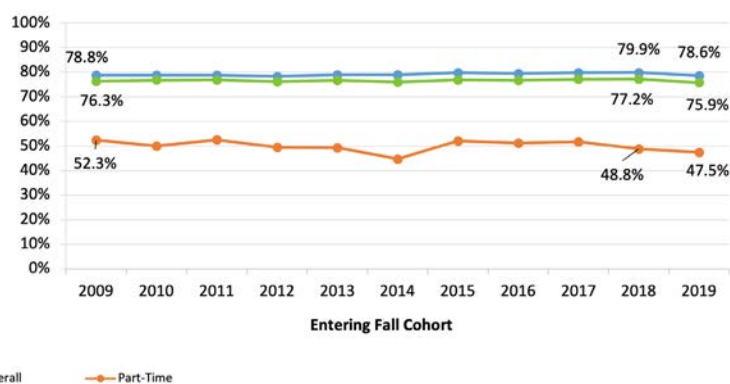
Students beginning at private non-profit four-year institutions also felt the dampening effects of the pandemic on their persistence and retention rates, showing 2 pp and 1.3 pp year-over-year declines, respectively; both rates were stable in the previous year (Figures 8a and 8b).

Unlike in the public four-year sector, the persistence and retention rate drops for the 2019 cohort were even between full-time and part-time starters. Both groups were retained at 1.3 pp less than their peers in 2018, and they persisted at 1.9 and 1.7 pp less than their peers in 2018, respectively (Figures 8a and 8b). In contrast, for the previous cohorts, part-time starters dropped more than full-time starters in both persistence and retention rates. Consistent with the prior cohorts, approximately 6 percent of fall 2019 beginning students in the private nonprofit four-year sector who persisted have increased or reduced their enrollment intensity by fall 2020.

**Figure 8a.** Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private Nonprofit Four-Year Institutions



**Figure 8b.** Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private Nonprofit Four-Year Institutions



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall	Retention	76.3%	76.8%	76.9%	76.2%	76.7%	76.0%	76.9%	76.7%	77.2%	77.2%	75.9%
	Persistence	86.8%	87.6%	87.3%	86.3%	86.7%	86.2%	87.2%	87.3%	87.4%	87.2%	85.2%
Full-Time	Retention	78.8%	78.8%	78.8%	78.3%	78.9%	79.0%	79.8%	79.5%	79.8%	79.9%	78.6%
	Persistence	89.5%	89.7%	89.3%	88.5%	89.0%	89.5%	90.0%	90.1%	89.9%	89.8%	87.9%
Part-Time	Retention	52.3%	50.1%	52.5%	49.5%	49.3%	44.8%	52.0%	51.2%	51.7%	48.8%	47.5%
	Persistence	60.2%	59.7%	61.0%	58.7%	58.0%	52.9%	59.4%	58.9%	59.1%	55.6%	53.9%

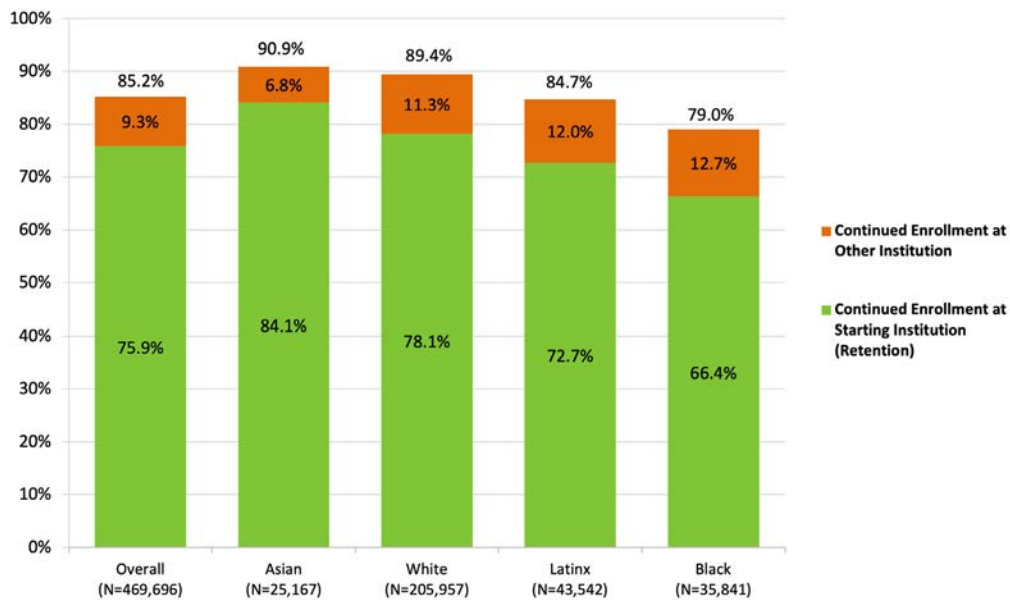
Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Racial and Ethnic Disparities at Private Nonprofit Four-Year Institutions

Persistence trends by race and ethnicity largely remained stable from prior cohort years and resemble overall trends. As shown in **Figure 9**, Asian students persist at the highest rate (90.9%), followed by White students (89.4%), Latinx students (84.7%), and Black students (79%).

Retention rates across these racial and ethnic groups mirror their respective persistence rates. However, Black students were the only group to increase in their retention rate (+1.9 pp) in the private non-profit four-year sector, although their enrollment numbers are small. As a result, their relative retention rate gap compared to other racial and ethnic groups has narrowed in the 2019 cohort. Similar to other institution sectors, they still had the lowest retention rate (66.4%) of all four groups. However, compared to the public college sector, they also lagged even further behind Asians (by 17.8 pp), Whites (by 11.8 pp) and Latinx students (by 6.4 pp).

**Figure 9.** Persistence and Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity: Private Nonprofit Four-Year Institutions



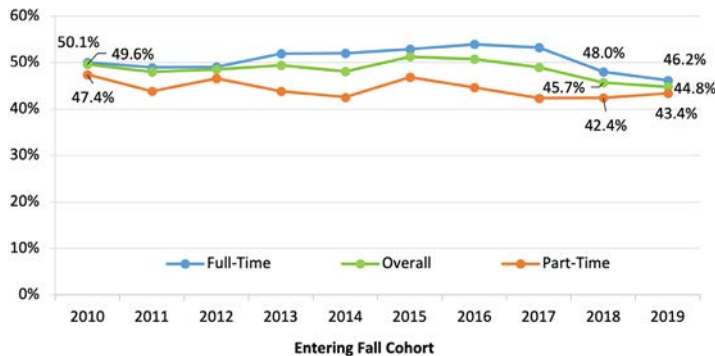
Note: Race and ethnicity data was reported for 80 percent of the fall 2019 cohort students in this sector. Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

## Starting at Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions

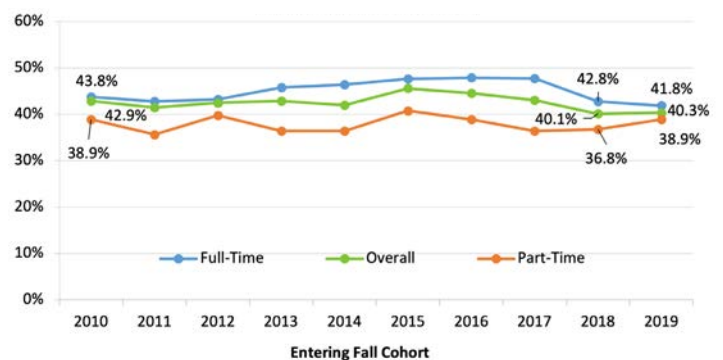
The persistence rate at private for-profit four-year colleges slipped by 0.9 pp from last year, with the decline concentrated among full-time students (-1.9 pp). However, this year-over-year persistence rate decline was smaller than in prior years (1.8 pp drop annually on average since 2016; see **Figure 10a**).

The retention rate remained stable from the previous year cohort (+0.2 pp to 40.3%) after having declined steadily since 2015 (**Figure 10b**). The rate did not fall and remained at last year's level due to a small increase in part-time freshmen, and the rate at which they were retained grew by 2.1 pp. Full-time starters were retained at 0.9 pp less than their full-time peers in the prior cohort year. Consistent with the 2018 cohort, approximately 16.5 percent of fall 2019 beginning students in the private for-profit four-year sector who persisted have increased or reduced their enrollment intensity by fall 2020.

**Figure 10a.** Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions



**Figure 10b.** Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions



		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall	Retention	42.9%	41.4%	42.4%	42.8%	42.0%	45.6%	44.5%	43.0%	40.1%	40.3%
	Persistence	49.6%	48.0%	48.6%	49.4%	48.1%	51.3%	50.8%	49.0%	45.7%	44.8%
Full-Time	Retention	43.8%	42.7%	43.2%	45.7%	46.3%	47.6%	47.8%	47.7%	42.8%	41.8%
	Persistence	50.1%	48.9%	49.1%	51.9%	52.0%	52.9%	53.9%	53.2%	48.0%	46.2%
Part-Time	Retention	38.9%	35.6%	39.7%	36.4%	36.4%	40.7%	38.9%	36.4%	36.8%	38.9%
	Persistence	47.4%	43.8%	46.6%	43.9%	42.5%	46.9%	44.6%	42.4%	42.4%	43.4%

Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

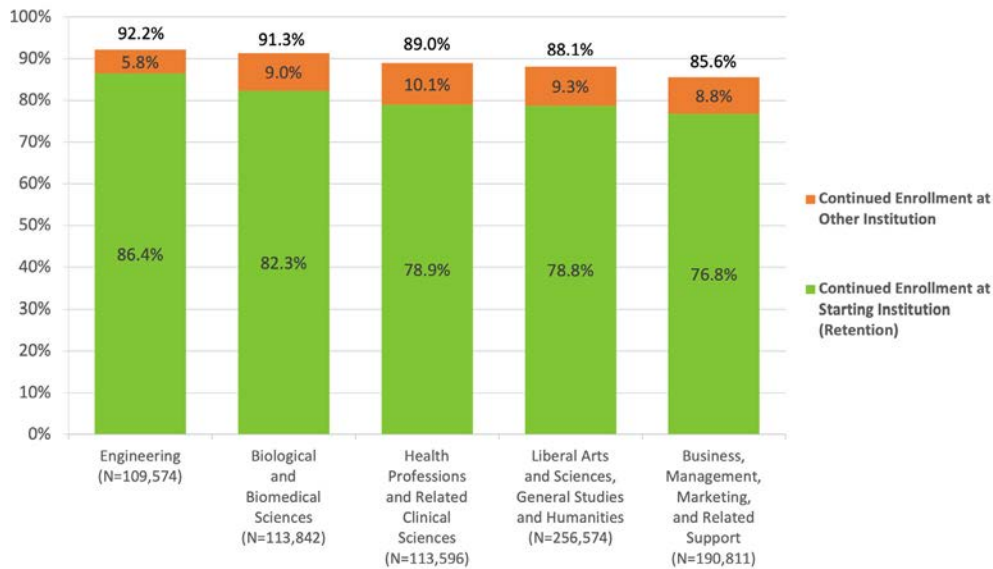
## Top Five Common Majors – Bachelor’s Degree Level

The persistence rate in engineering remains the highest of the top five majors by enrollment for bachelor’s degree seekers, at 92.2 percent, with biological and biomedical sciences majors following closely with a persistence rate of 91.3 percent (**Figure 11**). Engineering majors were the least likely to transfer out in their first year (5.8%) while students in health care majors were the most likely to transfer out (10.1%).

Both biological and biomedical sciences and health care majors saw notable increases in their retention rates over the 2018 cohort (+1.4 and +1.8 pp to 82.3 and 78.9 percent, respectively).

The largest persistence rate drop was in liberal arts majors (-1.6 pp to 88.1%).

**Figure 11.** Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Bachelor’s Degree



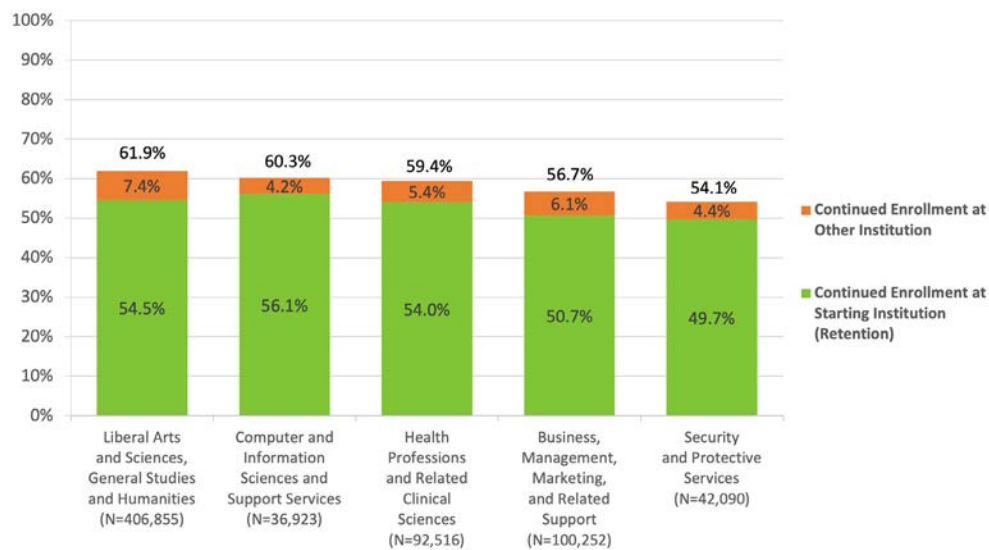
Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

Common majors are defined by enrollment sizes. N is the total enrollment in the specified field of major as of fall 2019. Major fields shown are: Engineering (CIP code 14), Biological/Biomedical Sciences (26), Liberal Arts (24), Health (51), and Business (52).

## Top Five Common Majors – Associate Degree Level

In line with the steep enrollment shortfalls facing the community college sector since the start of the pandemic (see our [COVID-19 enrollment reports](#) for more information), all top five associate degree majors by enrollment demonstrated substantial drops in the first-year persistence rate by at least 2 pp from last year. The greatest persistence and retention rate declines occurred for computer information sciences (-3.3 and -2.3 pp to 60.3% and 56.1%, respectively; **Figure 12**), after increasing the most of the top five majors in the previous year (+1.2 pp for both persistence and retention). Health care majors saw their persistence and retention rates fall by 2.2 and 1 pp, respectively, after remaining stable in the previous year (both +0.2 pp).

**Figure 12.** Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Associate Degree



Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

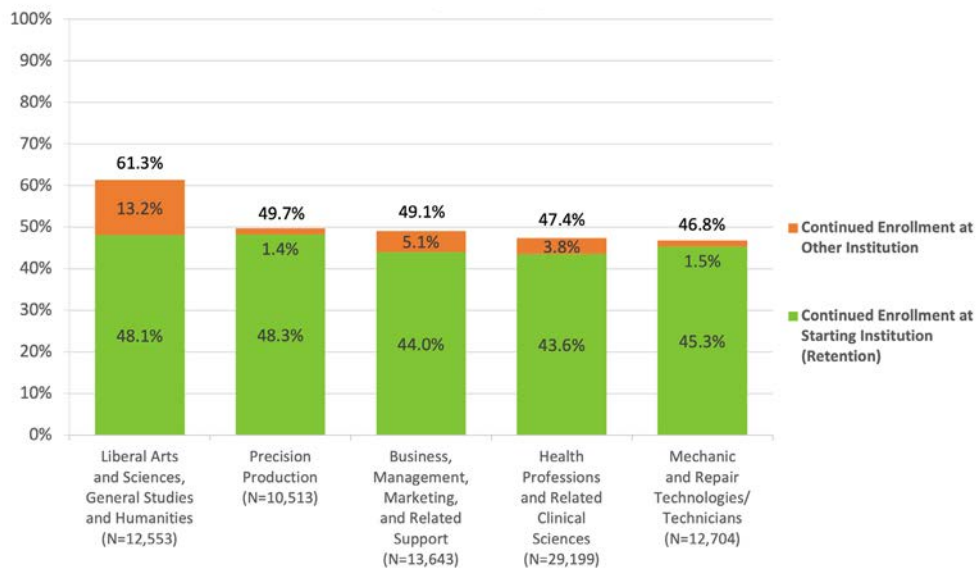
Common majors are defined by enrollment sizes. N is the total enrollment in the specified field of major as of fall 2019. Major fields shown are: Liberal Arts (CIP code 24), Computer Science (11), Health (51), Business (52), and Security Protective Services (43).

## Top Five Common Majors – Certificate Level

Persistence rates for the top five common majors in undergraduate certificate programs by enrollment were below 50 percent, except for liberal arts, humanities, and general studies majors, with a persistence rate of 61.3 percent (**Figure 13**). Precision production, mechanic and repair technologies, and business majors all dropped steeply in the 2019 cohort by 5 to 8 pp. Business majors also reversed a 0.7 pp gain in their retention rate made in the previous cohort, having declined by 4.6 pp in the 2019 cohort.

Health care majors decreased less in their persistence (-1.9 pp) and retention (-1.2 pp) rates compared to the previous year (-4.1 and -3.5 pp, respectively). They remain at the lowest retention rate of the top five majors.

**Figure 13.** Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Undergraduate Certificate



Data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#).

Common majors are defined by enrollment sizes. N is the total enrollment in the specified field of major as of fall 2019. Majors shown are: Liberal Arts (CIP code 24), Business (52), Mechanic Repair (47), Precision (48), and Health (51).

## Methodological Notes

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### National Coverage of the Data

Clearinghouse data track enrollments nationally and are not limited by institutional and state boundaries. As of fall 2019, institutions actively submitting enrollment data to the Clearinghouse account for 97 percent of all enrollments at Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S.

### Degree/Certificate-Seeking Status

The report is designed to examine retention and persistence rates for undergraduate-level degree-seeking students (certificate, associate, or bachelor's degrees), including both U.S. and international students. While degree-seeking students make up the vast majority of the first-time beginning postsecondary student cohort, starting with the publication released in 2020, the beginning cohort for our analysis also includes a small number of first-time college students enrolled in non-credential programs, as well as students for whom program level information was unknown but had valid enrollment records for the applicable entering cohort year.

Starting with the 2015 beginning cohort, we show persistence and retention trends for students enrolled in non-credential programs such as preparatory coursework, teacher certification, or other non-credit career and technical education (CTE) programs that may lead to an industry certification if the student takes the certification exam. Non-credential enrollments made up 1.6 percent of the fall 2019 beginning cohort.

Also starting with the 2015 beginning cohort, we show program level unknown, which consists of students whose credential program level was unreported (certificate, associate, or bachelor's degrees). The circumstances behind the lack of program information are institution-specific and can range from first-time students who are required to be undeclared until they declare a specific major, to non-degree students. Program level unknown enrollments made up approximately three percent of the fall 2019 cohort population.

Past editions included a subset of students who were enrolled in graduate programs (approximately 3.7% of each beginning cohort). To ensure the beginning cohort consisted solely of undergraduate students, starting with the publication released in 2020, we removed graduate enrollments from the cohorts and the data from 2014 onwards were restated to reflect the change.

### Retention

Defined in this report as continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall terms of a student's first and second year.

### Persistence

Defined in this report as continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall terms of a student's first and second year.

### Enrollment Intensity

A student is classified as having started college in a full-time status or part-time status based on their earliest reported enrollment intensity within the entering fall term. The part-time category comprises three-quarter-time, half-time and less-than-half-time students. We included non-credential enrollments in overall persistence and retention calculations, and reported them in a separate category in the Appendix.

### First-Time Beginning Students

This report uses historical Clearinghouse enrollment and degree data to confirm that students included in the study (1) showed no previous college enrollment, (2) had not previously completed a college degree or certificate, and (3) their first-time enrollment in an applicable cohort year was not categorized as dual enrollment (that is, any enrollment prior to age 18). Starting with the report published in 2020, current dual enrollments were excluded from each cohort.

### Former Dual Enrolled Students

The cohorts used in this study include former dual enrollment students: first time college students who had taken college courses prior to graduating from high school. Students were identified as former dual enrollment students if their enrollment or degree record prior to the entering cohort year was before the student turned 18 years old.

### Fall Enrollment

A student is counted as having been enrolled in the fall if they were enrolled for any length of time in a term that began between August 1 and October 31, inclusive.

### Program Level Enrollment by Major Field

Persistence and retention rates by major field were calculated based on institution reporting of enrollments at bachelor's degree, associate degree, and certificate program levels under the 6-digit CIP (Classification of Instructional Programs) by the NCES. The results were aggregated at 2-digit CIP code levels.