

Persistence and Retention

Fall 2020 Beginning Postsecondary Student Cohort

June 2022

Seventy-five percent of students who started college in the first fall of the COVID-19 pandemic returned for their second year. This persistence rate represents a one-year increase of 1.1 percentage points but has yet to recover to the pre-pandemic level.

The Persistence and Retention report series examines first-year persistence and retention rates for first-time college 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 these rates. This annual report helps institutions understand trends and disparities in this important early success indicator, by institutional type, state, credential type, starting enrollment intensity, major, and student demographic characteristics such as age and race and ethnicity. An analysis of gender disparity is added this year.

National Highlights

- The overall persistence rate for students who started college in fall 2020 improved by 1.1 percentage points (pp) to 75.0 percent. This one-year gain is more than the historical average, but the persistence rate is still below the pre-pandemic level (75.9%).
- This year's persistence rate increase is due to first-time students transferring out in their first year more than those remaining at their starting institution (+0.9 pp in the transfer-out rate vs. +0.2 pp in the retention rate). This is a reversal of last year's trend, where the decline in the transfer-out rate had caused the first-year persistence rate to drop.
- Community colleges and private for-profit four-year institutions saw increases in both persistence and retention, while other four-year institutions experienced small drops.
- Persistence rates increased in all major racial/ethnic groups except Native American students, who saw a 2.8 pp decline. Latinx students had a small rebound in persistence (+0.7 pp) following a major decline the year prior (-2.6 pp). There was no notable improvement in retention, regardless of race and ethnicity.
- It is noteworthy that the overall persistence rates improved as first-time students declined sharply (-9.9% or 255,000 fewer students compared with fall 2019; see Appendix). Community colleges accounted for 58 percent of the decline in the fall 2020 starters (146,700 fewer students).

Overall Persistence and Retention Rates

Of the 2.3 million people who entered college for the first time in fall 2020, 75.0 percent persisted at any U.S. institution by fall 2021. This represents an increase of 1.1 percentage points (pp) over the previous cohort (see **Figure 1b**). Breaking it out further (as shown on the right), 66.4 percent were retained at their starting institution for their second year or earned a credential at that institution in the year they enrolled. An additional 8.6 percent transferred out and continued enrollment at another institution by the second fall (see **Figure 1a**).

Despite this year's increases, both persistence and retention rates are still below pre-pandemic levels (1.0 pp and 0.6 pp below the fall 2018 cohort rates, respectively). Improvement was uneven across institution sectors: Community colleges and private for-profit four-year institutions led the persistence and retention rate gains this year. Other four-year institutions experienced small drops in both rates.

Historically, the transfer-out rate for first-time students averaged 9.2 percent, which precipitously fell to 7.7 percent for the fall 2019 cohort. This year the transfer-out rate rebounded to 8.6 percent, boosting the overall persistence rate for the fall 2020 cohort. As seen historically, full-time starters were more likely to transfer out than their part-time counterparts (8.3% and 7.6%, respectively; see **Appendix**). While persistence and retention rates are higher for full-time students (80.7% and 72.4%, respectively) than part-time students (51.5% and 43.8%, respectively), rates began to rebound for part-time starters (+3.5 pp in persistence and +1.5 pp in retention), compared to full-time students (-0.2 pp in persistence and -0.7 pp in retention; see **Appendix**).

Fall 2020 Beginning Cohort (N=2.3M)

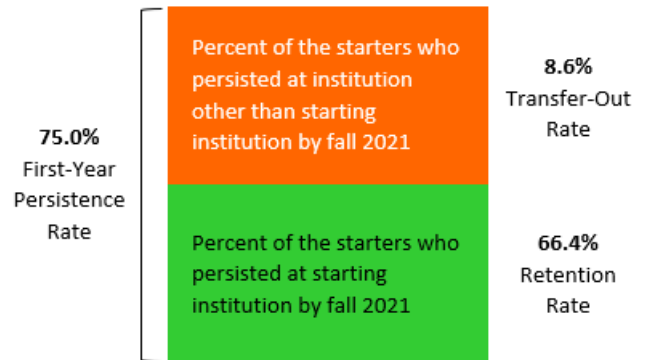


Figure 1a. Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: All Institutions

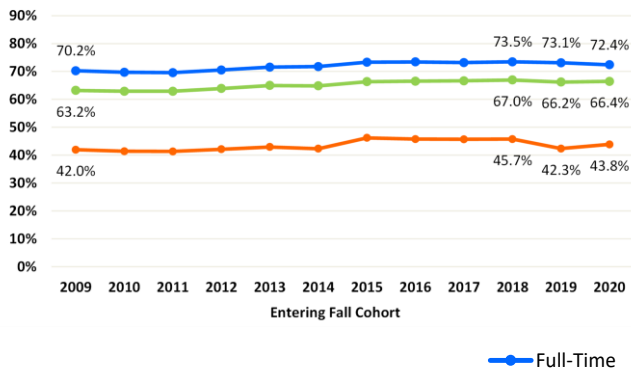
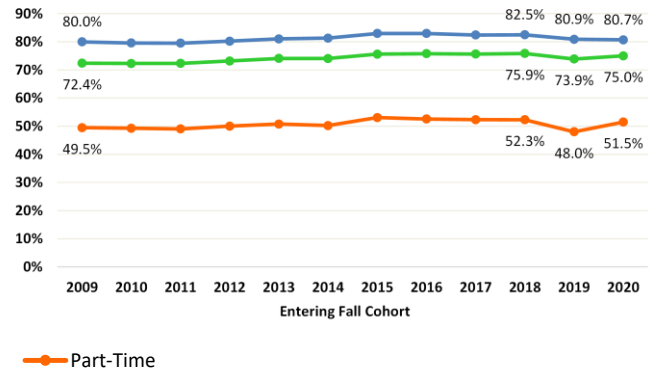


Figure 1b. Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: All Institutions



| | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|------------------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Overall | Retention | 63.2% | 62.9% | 62.9% | 63.9% | 65.0% | 64.9% | 66.3% | 66.5% | 66.7% | 67.0% | 66.2% | 66.4% |
| | Persistence | 72.4% | 72.3% | 72.3% | 73.2% | 74.1% | 74.1% | 75.6% | 75.8% | 75.6% | 75.9% | 73.9% | 75.0% |
| 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% | 72.4% |
| | Persistence | 80.0% | 79.6% | 79.5% | 80.2% | 81.0% | 81.3% | 83.0% | 83.0% | 82.4% | 82.5% | 80.9% | 80.7% |
| 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% | 43.8% |
| | Persistence | 49.5% | 49.3% | 49.1% | 50.0% | 50.8% | 50.2% | 53.1% | 52.6% | 52.3% | 52.3% | 48.0% | 51.5% |

For all figures in this report, data tables and methodological notes are available in the [Appendix](#). Data for the fall 2019 cohort can be found [here](#).

Disparities by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, & Age

Disparities by race and ethnicity remain large, with a 28-pp persistence rate gap between the highest (88.0% for Asian students) and the lowest (60.1% for Native American students; see **Figure 2a**). Persistence increased across all groups except for Native Americans, who saw a 2.8-pp drop over last year (see Appendix). Not only do Native American students have the lowest persistence and retention rates, but they also experienced the greatest one-year decline of any group. Notably, Latinx student persistence rate partially recovered (+0.7 pp) from an unusually large drop last year (-2.6 pp). There was no notable improvement in retention, regardless of race and ethnicity.

Newly added this year, persistence and retention rates reveal gender-driven disparities. The rate at which female students are being retained at their starting institution or persisting at any institution is 3 pp higher relative to their male peers (67.4% vs. 64.6% for retention and 76.2% vs. 73.6% for persistence; see **Figure 2b**).

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

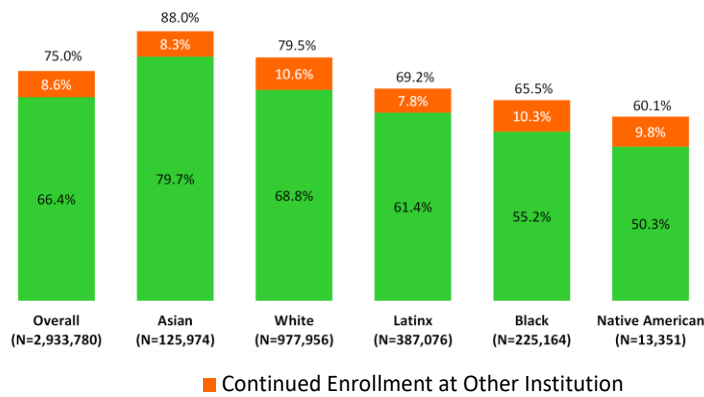
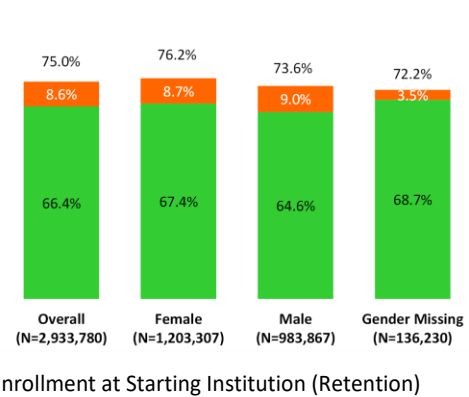


Figure 2b. Persistence and Retention Rates by Gender: All Institutions



Persistence and retention rates of delayed start students (ages 21 to 24) increased substantially over last year (+4.0 pp and +3.5 pp, respectively; see **Figures 3a** and **3b**). Persistence and retention rates are at the second highest and highest level, respectively, for this age group since we started tracking these data. Regardless, these students still trail traditional college-age students in both rates.

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

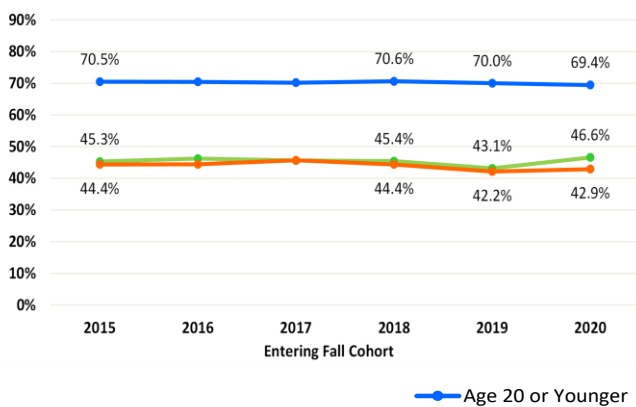
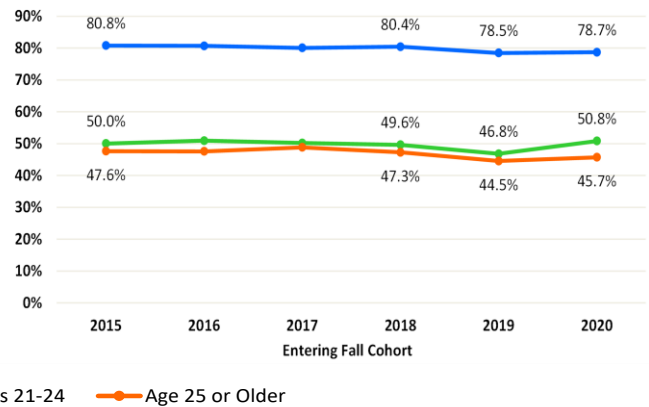


Figure 3b. Persistence Rates by Age Group at Entry: All Institutions



Starting at Public Four-Year Institutions

In contrast to the national trend, persistence rate for first-time students starting at public four-year institutions has dropped two straight years (-0.5 pp following -0.6 pp). Of the 1 million starting students in the sector, 83.5 percent re-enrolled at any institution the following fall, representing a total two-year decline of 1.2 pp during the pandemic (see **Figure 4b**). Of the students who persisted, 75.4 percent returned to the same institution and 8.1 percent continued enrollment at a different institution. This year's drop (-0.9 pp) completely erased last year's gain in retention (+0.7 pp; see **Figure 4a**).

Similar to the national trend, persistence and retention rates at public four-year institutions declined for full-time students (-1.5 pp for persistence and -1.6 pp for retention), while bouncing back for part-time starters (+3.1 pp and +1.0 pp, respectively). The divergence by enrollment intensity comes from large increases in transfer-out rates among part-time starters, surpassing pre-pandemic levels to the second highest rate for this group since we began tracking these data, with a 9.7% transfer-out rate, up 2.1 pp from last year (see Appendix).

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

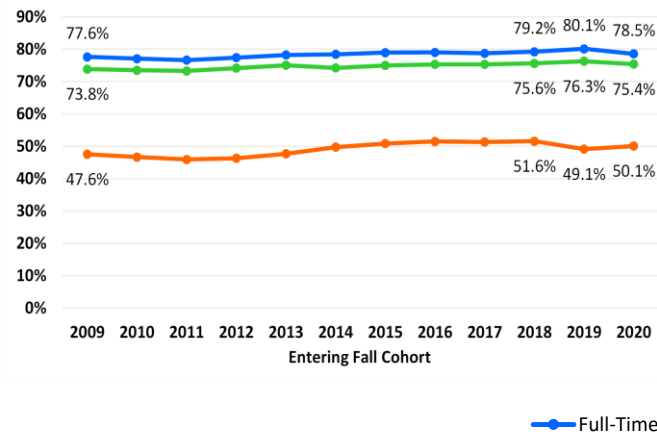
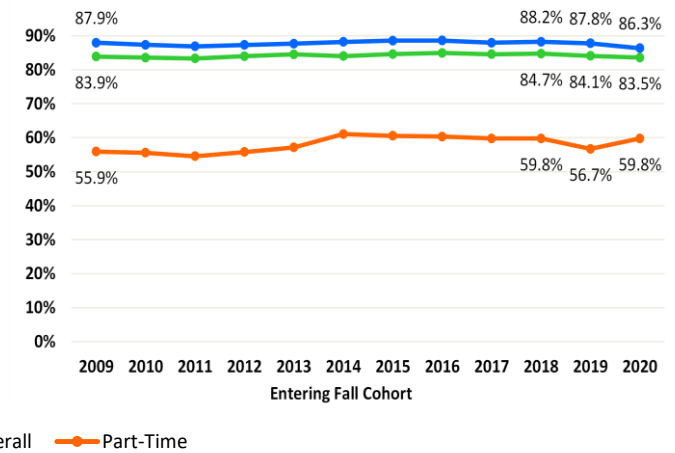


Figure 4b. Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Four-Year Institutions

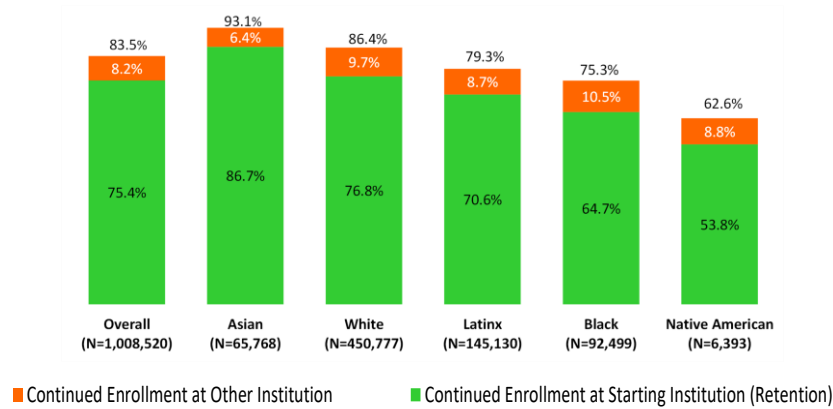


| | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|-----------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Overall | Retention | 73.8% | 73.5% | 73.3% | 74.1% | 75.0% | 74.2% | 75.0% | 75.3% | 75.3% | 75.6% | 76.3% | 75.4% |
| | Persistence | 83.9% | 83.6% | 83.3% | 84.0% | 84.5% | 84.0% | 84.6% | 84.9% | 84.6% | 84.7% | 84.1% | 83.5% |
| Full-Time | Retention | 77.6% | 77.1% | 76.6% | 77.4% | 78.2% | 78.4% | 78.9% | 79.0% | 78.7% | 79.2% | 80.1% | 78.5% |
| | Persistence | 87.9% | 87.3% | 86.9% | 87.3% | 87.7% | 88.2% | 88.6% | 88.6% | 88.0% | 88.2% | 87.8% | 86.3% |
| Part-Time | Retention | 47.6% | 46.7% | 45.9% | 46.3% | 47.7% | 49.8% | 50.9% | 51.5% | 51.3% | 51.6% | 49.1% | 50.1% |
| | Persistence | 55.9% | 55.6% | 54.5% | 55.8% | 57.2% | 61.1% | 60.6% | 60.3% | 59.8% | 59.8% | 56.7% | 59.8% |

Disparities at Public Four-Year Institutions by Race/Ethnicity & Gender

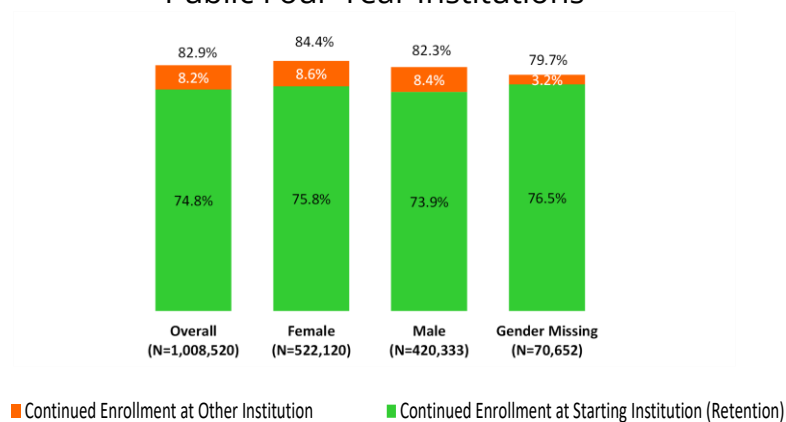
Asian students hold the highest persistence and retention rates (93.1% and 86.7%, respectively), followed by White (86.4% and 76.8%), Latinx (79.3% and 70.6%), Black (75.3% and 64.7%), and Native American students (62.6% and 53.8%; see **Figure 5a**). While persistence and retention rates remained relatively stable for Asian students in this sector (+0.3 pp for persistence and -0.1 pp for retention), both rates declined for all other groups, especially Native American students (more than -8 pp in both rates).

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



The gender gap in persistence and retention is somewhat narrower at public four-year institutions as female rates are 2 pp higher than male rates, compared with a national difference of 3 pp (see **Figure 5b**). Transfer-out rates are comparable for females and males (8.6% and 8.4%, respectively).

Figure 5b. Persistence and Retention Rates by Gender: Public Four-Year Institutions



Starting at Public Two-Year Institutions

Of the 815,000 students starting at community colleges in fall 2020, 61.5 percent persisted at any U.S. institution. This rate represents a notable improvement over last year (+3.0 pp), resulting in a total two-year decline of -0.6 pp during the pandemic (compared to fall 2018 cohort; see **Figure 6b**). Of those who persisted, 52.4 percent returned to the same institution representing a retention rate increase of 0.8 pp over last year, but still well below pre-pandemic levels (-1.3 pp compared to fall 2018 cohort; see **Figure 6a**).

The notable persistence rate gain is driven by increases in the transfer-out rate. Approximately 9.1 percent continued enrollment by transferring to a different institution, up 2.2 pp over last year's cohort. This marked the highest transfer-out rate in this sector since data tracking started in 2009 (see Appendix).

Persistence and retention rate improvements were more pronounced for part-time starters in the sector (+3.5 pp and +1.7 pp, respectively, compared with +2.0 pp and -0.2 pp for full-time starters, respectively; see Appendix).

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

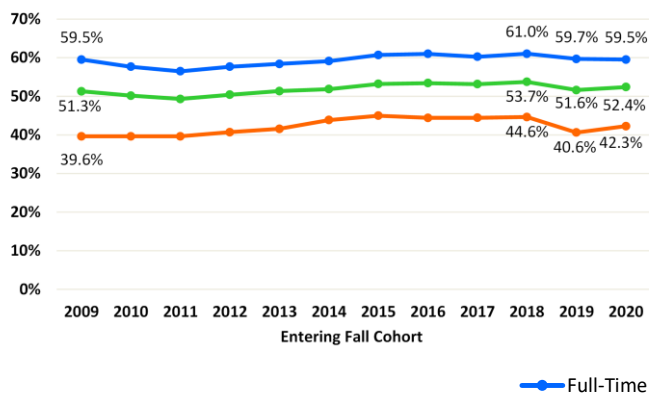
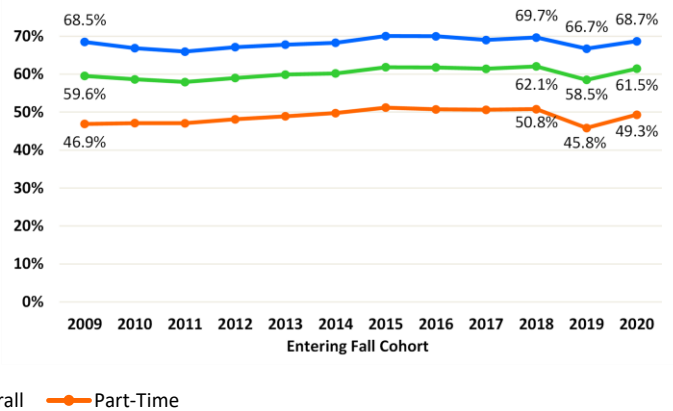


Figure 6b. Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Public Two-Year Institutions

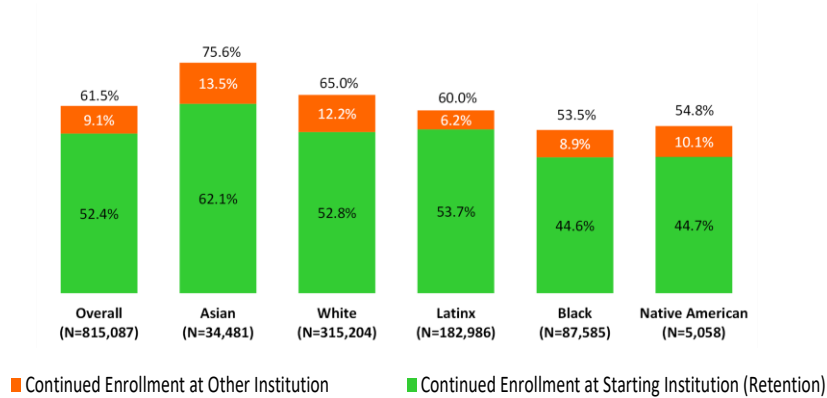


| | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|------------------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Overall | Retention | 51.3% | 50.2% | 49.3% | 50.4% | 51.3% | 51.9% | 53.2% | 53.4% | 53.2% | 53.7% | 51.6% | 52.4% |
| | Persistence | 59.6% | 58.7% | 57.9% | 59.0% | 59.9% | 60.2% | 61.9% | 61.8% | 61.4% | 62.1% | 58.5% | 61.5% |
| Full-Time | Retention | 59.5% | 57.7% | 56.5% | 57.7% | 58.4% | 59.1% | 60.7% | 61.0% | 60.2% | 61.0% | 59.7% | 59.5% |
| | Persistence | 68.5% | 66.9% | 66.0% | 67.2% | 67.8% | 68.3% | 70.1% | 70.0% | 69.0% | 69.7% | 66.7% | 68.7% |
| Part-Time | Retention | 39.6% | 39.6% | 39.6% | 40.7% | 41.6% | 43.8% | 45.0% | 44.4% | 44.4% | 44.6% | 40.6% | 42.3% |
| | Persistence | 46.9% | 47.1% | 47.1% | 48.1% | 48.9% | 49.8% | 51.2% | 50.7% | 50.6% | 50.8% | 45.8% | 49.3% |

Disparities at Public Two-Year Institutions by Race/Ethnicity & Gender

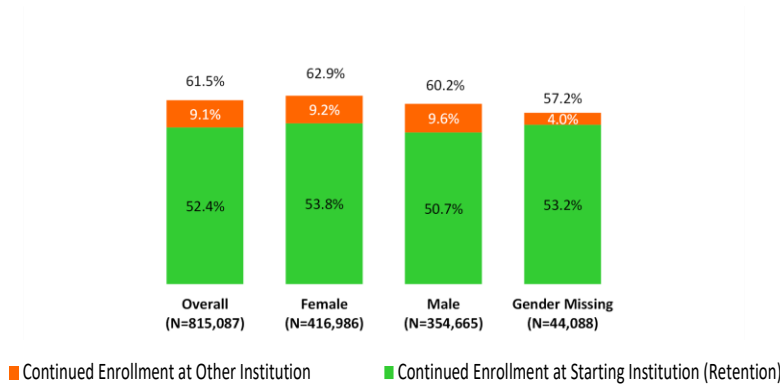
Black students hold the lowest persistence and retention rates of any group (53.5% and 44.6%, respectively; see **Figure 7a**), unlike the national trend where Native American students have the lowest rates. Asian students have the highest persistence and retention rates (75.6% and 62.1%, respectively), followed by White (65.0% and 52.8%), Latinx (60.0% and 53.7%), and Native American students (54.8% and 44.7%). While persistence rates increased across all groups examined, retention rates for White and Asian students declined (-1.2 pp and -2.3 pp, respectively). This retention decline was even more acute for Asian students enrolling full time (-4.8 pp). Native American students saw the largest rate increases in this sector (+1.3 for retention and +3.5 for persistence respectively).

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



In line with the national trend, females have persistence and retention rates approximately 3 pp higher than male students (62.9% vs. 60.2% for persistence and 53.8% vs. 50.7% for retention; see **Figure 7b**). Transfer-out rates for both groups are nearly equivalent (9.2% for females and 9.6% for males).

Figure 7b. Persistence and Retention Rates by Gender: Public Two-Year Institutions



Starting at Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions

In contrast to the national trend, first-time students starting at private non-profit four-year institutions in fall 2020 were less likely to persist than the previous cohort, while retention remained relatively stable. Of the 435,000 students starting at private non-profit four-year institutions, 84.5 percent persisted at any institution the following fall (see **Figure 8b**). This represents the largest decline of any institution sector observed over the first two years of the pandemic (2.7 pp below the fall 2018 cohort's rate). Of those who persisted, 75.5 percent returned to the same institution and 9.0 percent continued enrollment at a different institution, comparable to last year's cohort (75.9%; see **Figure 8a**).

Persistence rate changes did not vary by enrollment status. However, retention rates decreased particularly for part-time starters (-2.9 pp compared to -0.4 pp for full-time starters). While the transfer-out rate for full-time students continued to decline (-0.5 pp), part-time students experienced the second highest transfer-out rate since we started tracking the data (9.0%; 2.3 pp above pre-pandemic rate for the fall 2018 cohort; see Appendix).

Figure 8a. Retention Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions

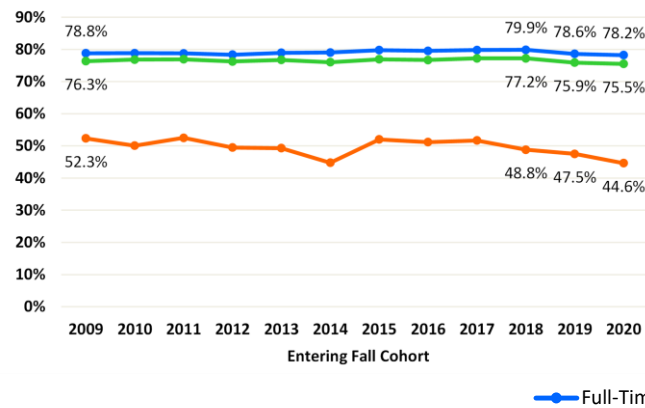
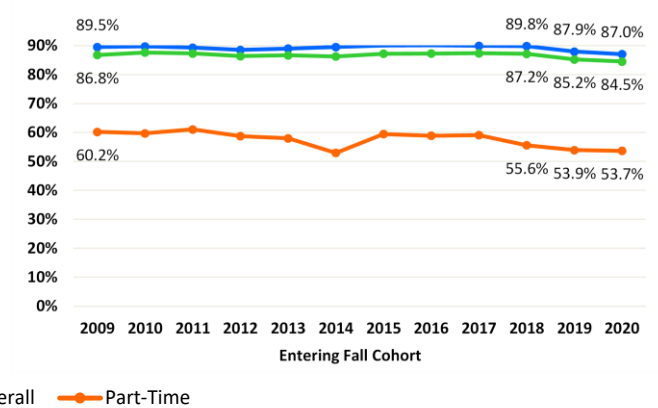


Figure 8b. Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions

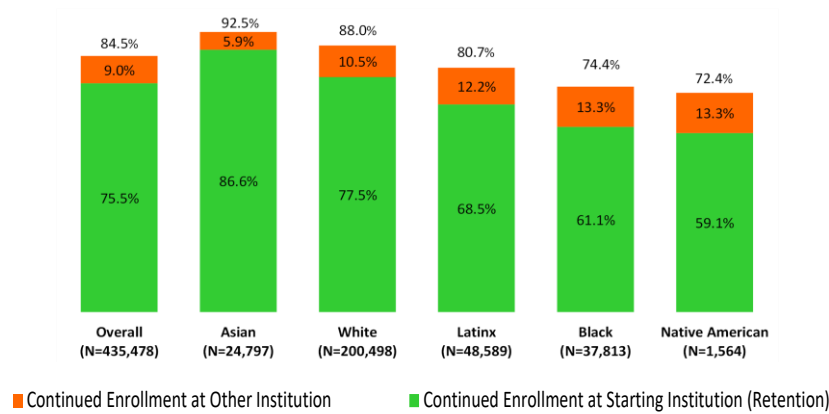


| | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|-----------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Overall | Retention | 76.3% | 76.8% | 76.9% | 76.2% | 76.7% | 76.0% | 76.9% | 76.7% | 77.2% | 77.2% | 75.9% | 75.5% |
| | Persistence | 86.8% | 87.6% | 87.3% | 86.3% | 86.7% | 86.2% | 87.2% | 87.3% | 87.4% | 87.2% | 85.2% | 84.5% |
| 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% | 78.2% |
| | Persistence | 89.5% | 89.7% | 89.3% | 88.5% | 89.0% | 89.5% | 90.0% | 90.1% | 89.9% | 89.8% | 87.9% | 87.0% |
| 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% | 44.6% |
| | Persistence | 60.2% | 59.7% | 61.0% | 58.7% | 58.0% | 52.9% | 59.4% | 58.9% | 59.1% | 55.6% | 53.9% | 53.7% |

Disparities at Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions by Race/Ethnicity & Gender

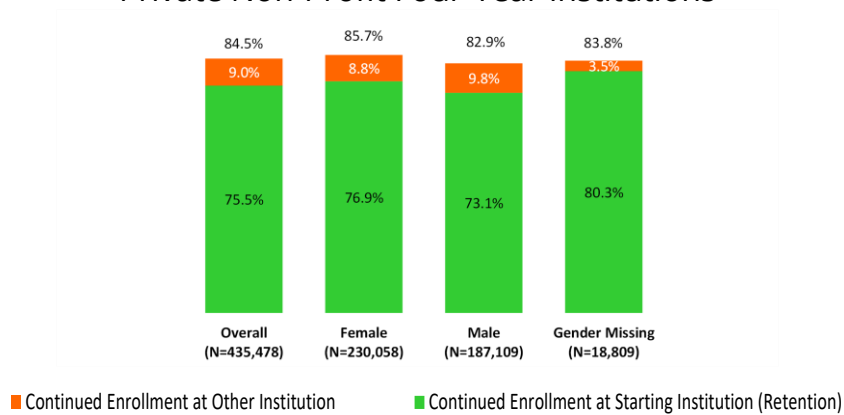
Asian students saw an increase in persistence and retention rates (+1.5 pp and +2.4 pp, respectively; see **Figure 9a**), while Native American (-3.4 pp and -2.2 pp), Latinx (-4.1 pp and -4.2 pp), and Black students (-4.7 pp and -5.3 pp) saw large decreases (see Appendix).

Figure 9a. Persistence and Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity: Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions



Females have persistence and retention rates approximately 3 to 4 pp higher than male students (85.7% vs. 82.9% for persistence and 76.9% vs. 73.1% for retention; see **Figure 9b**). The gender gap in transfer-out rate is greatest in this sector at almost one percentage point higher for males (8.8% for females and 9.8% for males).

Figure 9b. Persistence and Retention Rates by Gender: Private Non-Profit Four-Year Institutions



Starting at Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions

First-time students starting at private for-profit four-year institutions in fall 2020 were more likely to be retained and persist than the previous cohort. Of the 46,000 starting students, 47.4 percent persisted at any institution the following fall, reflecting a one-year increase of 2.6 pp (see **Figure 10b**). Of those who persisted, 42.5 percent returned to the same institution and 4.9 percent continued enrollment at a different institution (see **Figure 10a**).

Persistence and retention rates for this sector varied greatly by enrollment intensity and were impacted by changes in student mobility. While the transfer-out rate for full-time students went up to near pre-pandemic levels (+0.7 pp from last cohort year; -0.2 pp over the fall 2018 cohort), the transfer-out rate for part-time students had no improvement (-0.2 pp from last cohort year; -1.4 pp over the fall 2018 cohort). Subsequently, persistence and retention rates increased for full-time students (+3.9 pp and +3.2 pp, respectively), while declining for students enrolled part-time (-2.0 pp and -1.8 pp, respectively).

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

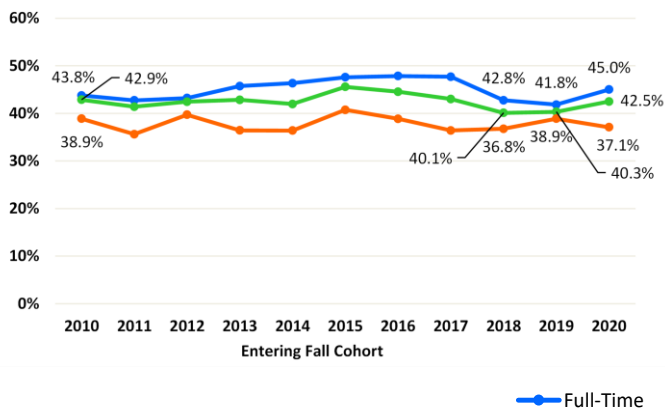
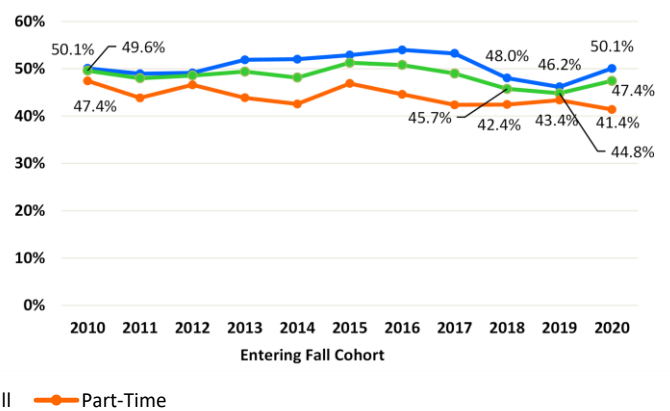


Figure 10b. Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment Intensity: Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions



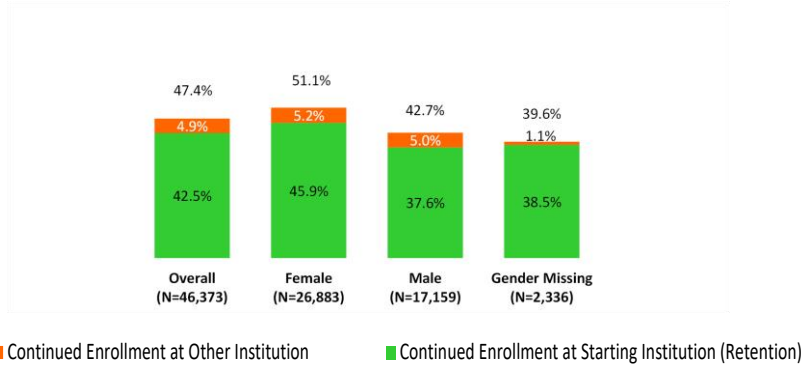
| | | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|------------------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Overall | Retention | 42.9% | 41.4% | 42.4% | 42.8% | 42.0% | 45.6% | 44.5% | 43.0% | 40.1% | 40.3% | 42.5% |
| | Persistence | 49.6% | 48.0% | 48.6% | 49.4% | 48.1% | 51.3% | 50.8% | 49.0% | 45.7% | 44.8% | 47.4% |
| Full-Time | Retention | 43.8% | 42.7% | 43.2% | 45.7% | 46.3% | 47.6% | 47.8% | 47.7% | 42.8% | 41.8% | 45.0% |
| | Persistence | 50.1% | 48.9% | 49.1% | 51.9% | 52.0% | 52.9% | 53.9% | 53.2% | 48.0% | 46.2% | 50.1% |
| Part-Time | Retention | 38.9% | 35.6% | 39.7% | 36.4% | 36.4% | 40.7% | 38.9% | 36.4% | 36.8% | 38.9% | 37.1% |
| | Persistence | 47.4% | 43.8% | 46.6% | 43.9% | 42.5% | 46.9% | 44.6% | 42.4% | 42.4% | 43.4% | 41.4% |

Note: Due to reporting changes, the fall 2009 entering cohort is not directly comparable to subsequent cohorts in this sector and is therefore excluded. However, institutions from the for-profit sector are included in the overall results for the 2009 cohort.

Disparities at Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions by Gender

Of the four large institution sectors examined, the gender gap is largest in this sector, at 8 to 9 pp (45.9% for females vs. 37.6% for males in retention; 51.1% for females vs. 42.7% for males in persistence; see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Persistence and Retention Rates by Gender:
Private For-Profit Four-Year Institutions

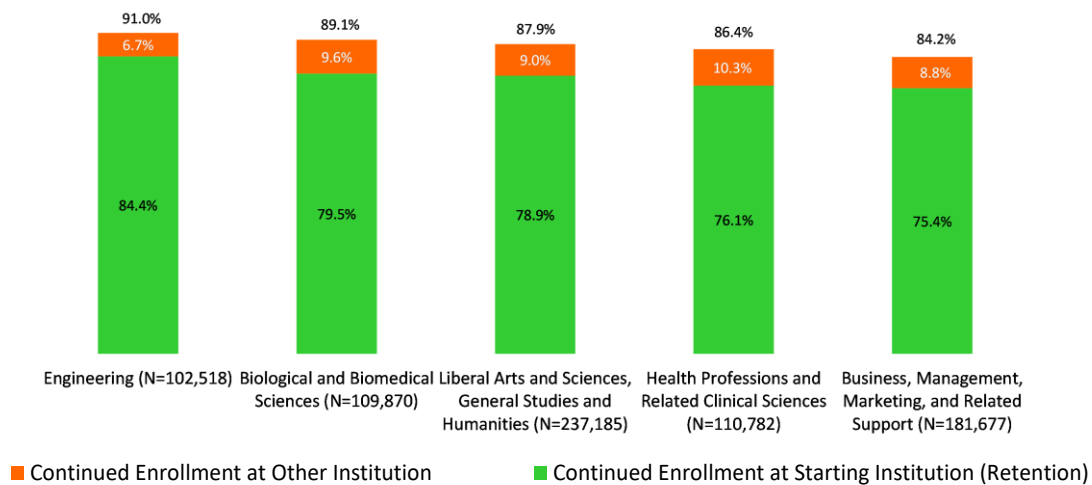


Top Five Common Majors - Bachelor's Degree Level

The persistence rate for engineering remains the highest of the top five majors by enrollment for bachelor's degree seekers, at 91.0 percent, a decrease of 1.2 pp over last year. Biological and biomedical sciences majors continue to follow closely with a persistence rate of 89.1 percent, a decrease of 2.2 pp over last year (see **Figure 12** and Appendix). While transfer-out rate for engineering majors increased slightly (+0.9 pp), they were still the least likely to transfer out in their first year (6.7%), while health care majors were still the most likely to transfer out (10.3%).

Mirroring persistence rates, the retention rates in engineering remain the highest at 84.4 percent, followed by biological and biomedical sciences majors with a retention rate of 79.5 percent. Liberal arts majors remained relatively stable over last year (+0.1 pp), while all other major fields saw notable decreases in their retention rates ranging from -1.4 pp (business) to -2.8 pp (biological and biomedical sciences).

Figure 12. Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Bachelor's Degrees

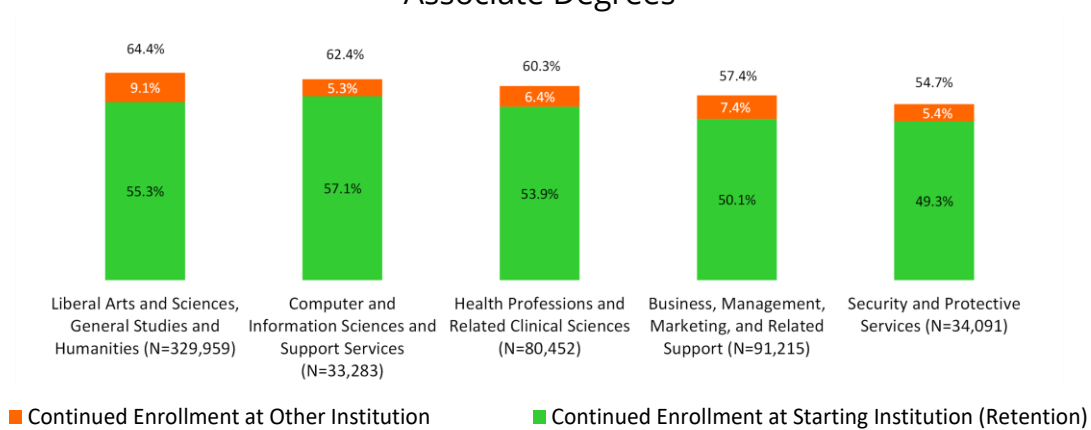


Top Five Common Majors - Associate Degree Level

The persistence rate for liberal arts remains the highest of the top five majors by enrollment for associate degree seekers, at 64.4 percent, and continues to be followed by computer and information science majors with a persistence rate of 62.4 percent (see **Figure 13**). Consistent with the overall persistence improvement at the community college sector, the top 5 majors show persistence rate increases, ranging from +0.6 pp (security and protective services) to +2.5 pp (liberal arts majors). While transfer-out rates increased for all five majors, liberal arts majors are still the most likely to transfer out in their first year (9.1%) and computer and information science majors are still the least likely (5.3%).

The retention rate for computer science majors remains the highest of the top five majors, at 57.1 percent, followed by liberal arts majors (55.3%). Health care majors remained relatively stable from last year (-0.1 pp), while business and security majors saw a decline in retention (-0.6 pp and -0.4 pp, respectively). Mirroring persistence rates, liberal arts and computer science majors saw increases in retention rates (+0.8 pp and +1.0 pp, respectively).

Figure 13. Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Associate Degrees

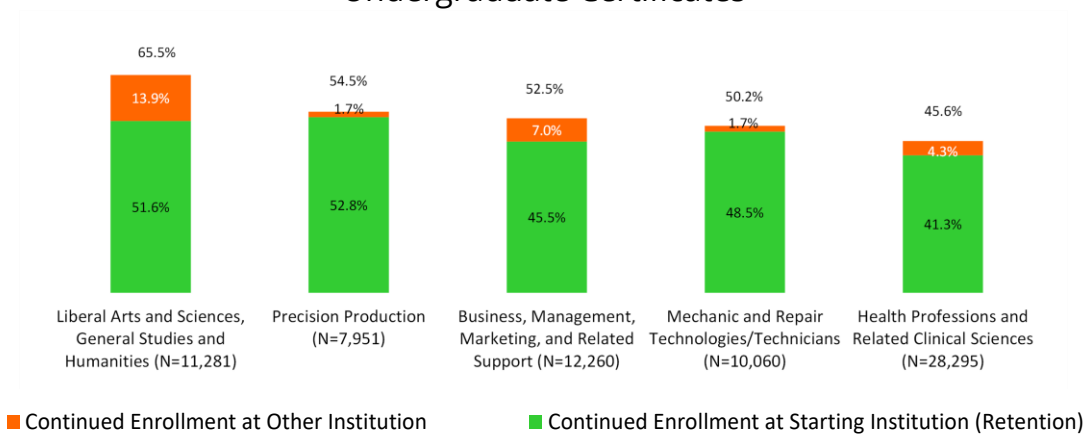


Top Five Common Majors - Certificate Level

The persistence rate in liberal arts remains the highest of the top five majors by enrollment for undergraduate certificate seekers, at 65.5 percent, and continues to be followed by precision production majors with a persistence rate of 54.5 percent (see **Figure 14**). Health care majors are the top 5 major with the lowest persistence rate (45.6%). While transfer-out rates increased for all five majors, liberal arts majors are still the most likely to transfer out in their first year (13.9%).

The retention rate for precision production majors remains the highest of the top five majors, at 52.8 percent, and continues to be followed by liberal arts majors with a retention rate of 51.6 percent. Similar to persistence, all majors except for health care saw an increase in retention rates this year ranging from +1.5 pp (business) to +4.5 pp (precision production).

Figure 14. Persistence and Retention Rates in Top Five Common Majors: Undergraduate Certificates



Methodological Notes

National Coverage of the Data

Clearinghouse data track enrollments nationally and are not limited by institutional and state boundaries. As of fall 2020, 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 persistence and retention 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 2020 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 2.5 percent of the fall 2020 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.

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.

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 while in 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.

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.

Race and Ethnicity

Not all institutions report race and ethnicity data to the Clearinghouse. Missing data (for institutions that do not report to the Clearinghouse) and unknown data (for students that do not report to their institution) made up approximately 20 percent of the fall 2020 beginning cohort. Due to a high missing rate, the report does not analyze race/ethnicity patterns for the private, for-profit, four-year institution sector. The main analysis focuses on the following groups: White, Asian, Black, Latinx, Native American. But data for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Multi-Racial, and Non-Resident Alien can be found in the Appendix.

Gender

Gender is reported to the Clearinghouse as male or female by institutions. Not all institutions report gender data to the Clearinghouse. Missing data made up approximately 5 percent of the fall 2020 beginning cohort.

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 according to the 2020 version of the 6-digit CIP (Classification of Instructional Programs) by the NCES. The results were aggregated at 2-digit CIP code levels.

The NCES updated CIP classifications in 2020. The updated definitions were used for this report, however, data from previous cohorts still follow the 2010 classification. The 2020 updates generally added new categories for programs of study, rather than replacing the 2010 categories with new ones, with some exceptions.

The "Agriculture, Agriculture Operations and Related Sciences" family was most largely affected, particularly veterinary-related programs that moved from Health Professions (CIP 51) to Agriculture (CIP 01). Caution should be taken when comparing these major fields over time.

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