

Persistence and Retention

Fall 2021 Beginning Postsecondary Student Cohort

July 2023

Nearly 76 percent of the 2.4 million students who started college in fall 2021 returned for their second year. This persistence rate marks a one-year increase of 0.9 percentage points and a return to pre-pandemic levels. Persistence rate gains are notable among full-time students, Native American students, and computer science majors.

The **Persistence and Retention** report series examines first-year persistence and retention rates for beginning postsecondary students. Persistence rate is the percentage of students who return to college at *any* institution for their second year, while retention rate is 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, credential level sought, starting enrollment intensity, major field, and student demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and race and ethnicity. This year's report includes a new data dashboard to enable viewers to analyze, visualize, and interact with the longitudinal data, which are also available for download.

National Highlights

- The overall persistence rate for students who started college in fall 2021 was 75.7 percent, up 0.9 percentage points (pp) from last year. This persistence rate matches the pre-pandemic average for the 2016 to 2018 entering classes.
- This latest persistence rate growth was driven by a higher share of students being retained at their starting institution into their second year (+0.9 pp in retention). This is a shift from last year's trend, where a higher share of students transferring out in their first year drove persistence rate increases.
- Persistence rates improved in all institution types except for-profit four-year colleges and primarily associate degree granting baccalaureate institutions (PABs). Community colleges saw slight persistence rate gains, building on a sharp increase last year and approaching levels not seen since 2018.
- Persistence and retention rates increased for all major racial/ethnic groups, except for Asian student retention which was stable (-0.1 pp from last year). Native American students made notable gains after sharp decreases last year (+2.0 pp in persistence and +1.6 pp in retention over last year).
- The size of the fall entering postsecondary student cohort increased in 2021 for the first time since 2018 (+3.4%, 78,400 students, from last year), although it did not return to pre-pandemic levels. The community college entering cohort in particular remained well below pre-pandemic levels as it continued to decline in fall 2021.

Of the 2.4 million students who entered postsecondary education for the first time in fall 2021, 75.7 percent persisted at *any* U.S. institution by fall 2022. This persistence rate is 0.9 pp above the previous cohort and matches pre-pandemic levels (2016 to 2018 average, see **Figure 1**). As shown in Figure 1, 67.2 percent of students were retained at their starting institution for their second year or earned a credential at that institution within a year of enrollment, a rate 0.5 pp above the pre-pandemic average. An additional 8.6 percent transferred out and continued enrollment at another institution by their second fall. This transfer-out rate was essentially flat compared to the previous cohort, meaning that gains in persistence among fall 2021 college starters were driven by the higher share remaining at their starting institution into their second year.

Not all institution sectors saw persistence and retention improvements. While community colleges as well as public and private nonprofit four-year institutions saw increases in both persistence and retention rates this year, private for-profit four-year colleges and primarily associate degree granting baccalaureate (PAB) institutions experienced declines (see **Table 1**). This marks the second consecutive year that community colleges saw gains, approaching levels of persistence and retention not seen since the 2018 entering class. Nonetheless, the community college freshman class continued to shrink in fall 2021 while freshman enrollment recovered to pre-pandemic levels in other sectors (see **Appendix Tab 1**).

As more people sought short-term, skilled trade credentials in fall 2021, the share of certificate seekers who earned a credential in their first year or persisted into their second fall increased across the top skilled trade majors by enrollment—mechanic and repair technologies, precision production, construction trades, and personal and culinary services (see **Figure 8**). Health care majors' persistence and retention rates improved across all credential levels, but starting enrollment in these majors was flat among bachelor's degree seekers and declined among other undergraduates (see Figure 8). Computer science, which witnessed double-digit enrollment growth, also saw increases in persistence and retention among freshmen at all credential levels.

Nationally, retention rates increased regardless of enrollment intensity, while persistence increased only for full-time students and held steady for part-time students (see **Figures 3a** and **3b**). Public two-year institutions were the only sector to experience increases in both full-time and part-time persistence. Both persistence and retention rates declined for part-time students at public and private for-profit four-year institutions, as well as at PABs.

Disparities by race and ethnicity remain large, with a 26-pp persistence rate gap between the highest (88.4% for Asian students) and the lowest (62.1% for Native American students; see **Figure 4a**). Of note, Native American student persistence and retention increased after sharp decreases last year. Latinx persistence and retention increased in all sectors except for PABs. At public four-year institutions, Black students saw declines in both rates, even as sector-wide persistence and retention rates increased. At public two-year institutions, Asian, Black, and Native American students experienced declines in both rates, in contrast to the sector-wide trend. At private nonprofit four-year institutions, Native American students were the only major racial/ethnic group to experience persistence and retention rate decreases.

Gender-related disparities were stable at the national level compared to last year's cohort: Persistence and retention rates for female students are nearly 3-pp higher than those for their male peers (see **Figures 6a** and **6b**). However, the magnitude of this gender disparity differs by sector. Public four-year institutions have the smallest gender disparity in both persistence and retention (1.7 pp and 1.4 pp, respectively), while private for-profit four-year institutions have the largest (10.2-pp gap for persistence and 9.6-pp for retention).

Persistence and retention rates held steady or increased this year for starters 20 years old or younger, leading to a 1.4-pp increase in both rates nationally for this group. In contrast, rates for older students fell. Those 21 to 24 lost roughly one percentage point, driven by marked declines in persistence and retention at public and private nonprofit four-year institutions that nearly erased last year's gains (see **Figures 5a** and **5b**). Those 25 and older experienced larger declines in both rates (-1.5 pp) regardless of sector.

All figure and table references refer to the data dashboard unless otherwise noted.