



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education

OVERVIEW

Post-traditional students are over the age of 24 when they enter higher education; the “traditional” age range of college-goers is typically defined as 18-24.¹ In general, post-traditional students have one or more of the following characteristics: they delayed enrollment in college after high school, they attend part-time for at least part of an academic year, they work full-time while also enrolled in school, they are financially independent, or they have dependents (spouse and/or children).

ENROLLMENT

- In [fall 2019](#), post-traditional students made up 33.4% of all postsecondary enrollment.
 - Male post-traditional students made up 13.2% of all postsecondary enrollment and 31% of all male postsecondary enrollment.
 - Female post-traditional students made up 20.2% of all postsecondary enrollment and 35.2% of all female postsecondary enrollment.
- Since [fall 2009](#), overall post-traditional student enrollment has declined from 7.9 million to 6.6 million, a 17.8% decrease.
 - Full-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 3.4 million to 2.7 million, a 19.4% decrease.
 - Part-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 4.6 million to 3.8 million, a 16.6% decrease.
- Though post-traditional students are much more likely to attend [public institutions](#) of higher education versus private, they are overrepresented in the for-profit sector.
 - In fall 2019, 73% of post-traditional undergraduate students attended public institutions: 32% attended public four-year institutions and 40% attended public two-year institutions.²
 - In fall 2019, post-traditional students made up 68.2% of all for-profit enrollment and 81.1% of all for-profit part-time enrollment.
- Post-traditional students are much [more likely](#) to enroll in online courses than traditionally aged students.

FINANCIAL AID AND STUDENT DEBT

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, [57%](#) of post-traditional students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid in the 2017–18 academic year, compared to 60% of traditionally aged students.
 - [47%](#) of post-traditional students received a Pell Grant, compared to 42% of traditionally aged students.
 - [38%](#) of post-traditional students received a federal student loan, similar to traditionally aged students.

¹ While the U.S. Department of Education uses the term “nontraditional,” many researchers prefer the term “post-traditional” since it recognizes these students for the value they bring to their colleges. In this brief, terms used reflect their data sources.

² Due to rounding in the Digest of Education Statistics, percent values may not completely add up.

- Among post-traditional students who received federal Title IV aid in 2017–18, the [average amount](#) received was \$8,343.
 - The average Pell Grant amount for post-traditional students was \$3,528.
 - The average federal loan amount for post-traditional students was \$7,774.
- According to the [Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#):
 - Post-traditional students who first entered postsecondary education in 2003–04 and had not paid their student loans off still owed an average of \$18,476, compared to \$24,952 for traditionally aged students 12 years after entering
 - However, post-traditional students owed on average 80% of their total amount borrowed, compared to 68% for traditionally aged students.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT³

- Among post-traditional students who entered postsecondary education in fall 2011, by June 2017, [6.5%](#) had attained a bachelor's degree, 15.3% had attained an associate degree, 16.6% had attained a certificate, and 61.6% had not attained a degree or certificate.
 - Among traditionally aged students, 40.8% had attained a bachelor's degree, 10.3% had attained an associate degree, 7.4% had attained a certificate, and 41.5% had not attained a degree or certificate.
- Post-traditional students represented [27.8%](#) of all bachelor's degree completions in the 2017–18 academic year.

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, post-traditional graduates reported having an average gross income of [\\$71,823](#), compared to \$78,013 for traditionally aged graduates.
- Wealth accumulation can be [measured](#) differently from income. Ten years after graduating:
 - [67%](#) of post-traditional graduates reported owning a home, compared to 61% of traditionally aged graduates.
 - [84%](#) of post-traditional graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 88% of traditionally aged graduates.

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- [48.8%](#) of post-traditional students reported having dependent children, compared to just 3.9% of traditionally aged students.
- Post-traditional students are [more likely](#) to be low-income and require financial assistance.
- Post-traditional students are [more likely](#) to work and work longer hours while enrolled than traditionally aged students.
 - 37.4% of post-traditional students worked full-time while enrolled, compared to 10.7% of traditionally aged students.

DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#). & [Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, March 2023.

[Baccalaureate & Beyond Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2023.

[Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2023.

[Digest of Education Statistics](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2023.

[National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2023.

³ Completion rates are based on entering cohorts at 150% time. Therefore, among those completing their program in 2020, four-year institutions represent the 2014 cohort and two-year institutions represent the 2017 cohort.