



# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 2021](#), post-traditional students made up 33.5% of all postsecondary enrollment.
  - Male post-traditional students made up 12.7% of all postsecondary enrollment and 30.5% of all male postsecondary enrollment.
  - Female post-traditional students made up 20.8% of all postsecondary enrollment and 35.7% of all female postsecondary enrollment.
- Since [fall 2011](#), overall post-traditional student enrollment has declined from 8.3 million to 6.3 million, a 21.2% decrease.
  - Full-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 3.4 million to 2.6 million, a 21.2% decrease.
  - Part-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 4.6 million to 3.6 million, a 20.4% 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 2021, 71.0% of post-traditional undergraduate students attended public institutions: 34.5% attended public four-year institutions and 36.5% attended public two-year institutions.<sup>2</sup>
  - In fall 2021, post-traditional students made up 68.9% of all for-profit enrollment and 79.9% of all for-profit part-time enrollment.
- Post-traditional students are much [more likely](#) to enroll exclusively in online courses than traditionally aged students.

### FINANCIAL AID AND STUDENT DEBT

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, [52%](#) of post-traditional students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid in the 2019–20 academic year, compared to 56.3% of traditionally aged students.
  - [42.7%](#) of post-traditional students received a Pell Grant, compared to 39% of traditionally aged students.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

- [32.8%](#) of post-traditional students received a federal student loan, compared to 35.4% of traditionally aged students.
- Among post-traditional students who received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the [average amount](#) received was \$7,913.
  - The average Pell Grant amount for post-traditional students was \$3,662.
  - The average federal loan amount for post-traditional students was \$7,545.
- 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 ATTAINMENT

- 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 [28.9%](#) of all bachelor’s degree completions in the 2019–20 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

- [47.6%](#) of post-traditional students reported having dependent children, compared to just 3.4% 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.
  - 41.9% of post-traditional students worked full-time while enrolled, compared to 17.7% of traditionally aged students.

## DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#). & [Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, February 2025.

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

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

[Digest of Education Statistics](#). National Center for Education Statistics, February 2025.

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