



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.* 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.³
 - Male post-traditional students made up 12.7% of all postsecondary enrollment and 30.5% of all male postsecondary enrollment.³
 - Female post-traditional students made up 20.8% of all postsecondary enrollment and 35.7% of all female postsecondary enrollment.³
- Since Fall 2011, overall post-traditional student enrollment has declined from 8.3 million to 6.3 million, a 21.2% decrease.³
 - Full-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 3.4 million to 2.6 million, a 21.2% decrease.³
 - Part-time post-traditional enrollment declined from 4.6 million to 3.6 million, a 20.4% decrease.³
- 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.³
 - 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.³
 - 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.³
- Post-traditional students are much more likely to enroll exclusively in online courses than traditionally aged students.³

FINANCIAL AID AND STUDENT DEBT

- In the 2019-20 academic year, 52% of post-traditional students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid compared to 56.3% of traditionally aged students.⁴
 - 42.7% of post-traditional students received a Pell Grant, compared to 39% of traditionally aged students.⁴
 - 32.8% of post-traditional students received a federal student loan, compared to 35.4% of traditionally aged students.⁴

* 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.

- Among post-traditional students who received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the average amount received was \$7,913.⁴
 - The average Pell Grant amount for post-traditional students was \$3,662.⁴
 - The average federal loan amount for post-traditional students was \$7,545.⁴
- 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.²
- However, post-traditional students owed on average 80% of their total amount borrowed, compared to 68% for traditionally aged students.²

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- Among post-traditional students who entered postsecondary education in Fall 2011, 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 by June 2017.²
 - 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.²
- Post-traditional students represented 28.9% of all bachelor's degree completions in the 2019–20 academic year.⁴

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- 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.¹
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.⁵ Ten years after graduating:
 - 67% of post-traditional graduates reported owning a home, compared to 61% of traditionally aged graduates.¹
 - 84% of post-traditional graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 88% of traditionally aged graduates.¹

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- 47.6% of post-traditional students reported having dependent children, compared to just 3.4% of traditionally aged students.⁴
- Post-traditional students are more likely to be low-income and require financial assistance.⁴
- Post-traditional students are more likely to work and work longer hours while enrolled than traditionally aged students.⁴
 - 41.9% of post-traditional students worked full-time while enrolled, compared to 17.7% of traditionally aged students.⁴

DATA SOURCES

¹ [Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

² [Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

³ [Digest of Education Statistics](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2025.

⁴ [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

⁵ [Wealth Analysis FAQ](#). Urban Institute, 2021.