



# 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 did not receive a standard high school diploma, 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 2023, post-traditional students made up 32.1% of all postsecondary enrollment.<sup>4</sup>
  - Male post-traditional students accounted for 12.3% of all postsecondary enrollment and 29.1% of all male postsecondary enrollment.<sup>4</sup>
  - Female post-traditional students accounted for 19.8% of all postsecondary enrollment and 34.4% of all female postsecondary enrollment.<sup>4</sup>
- Between Fall 2013 and Fall 2023, post-traditional student enrollment declined by 20.8% from 7.7 million to 6.1 million.<sup>4</sup>
  - Full-time post-traditional enrollment declined 19.6%, from 3.4 million to 2.7 million.<sup>4</sup>
  - Part-time post-traditional enrollment declined 20.6%, from 4.3 million to 3.4 million.<sup>4</sup>
- Though post-traditional students are much more likely to attend public institutions of higher education than private ones, they are overrepresented in the for-profit sector.<sup>4</sup>
  - In Fall 2023, 61% of post-traditional undergraduate students attended public institutions: 39.5% attended public four-year institutions and 21.1% attended public two-year institutions.<sup>4</sup>
  - In Fall 2023, post-traditional students made up 74.5% of all for-profit enrollment.<sup>4</sup>

### FINANCIAL AID AND STUDENT DEBT

- In 2019-20, 55% of post-traditional students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid compared to 54.8% of traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>
  - 48.9% of post-traditional students received a Pell Grant, compared to 39.4% of traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>
  - 32.1% of post-traditional students received a federal student loan, compared to 34.8% of traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>
- Among post-traditional students who received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the average amount received was \$7,744.<sup>5</sup>
  - The average Pell Grant amount for post-traditional students was \$3,808.<sup>5</sup>
  - The average federal loan amount for post-traditional students was \$7,205.<sup>5</sup>
- Post-traditional students who first entered postsecondary education in 2003–04 and had not paid their student loans off still owed an average of \$24,755, compared to \$33,491 for traditionally aged students 12 years after entering.<sup>2</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.

## 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.<sup>2</sup>
  - Among traditionally aged students, 40.8% had attained a bachelor's degree, 10.6% had attained an associate degree, 7.4% had attained a certificate, and 41.5% had not attained a degree or certificate.<sup>2</sup>
- Post-traditional students represented 4% of all bachelor's degree completions in the 2019–20 academic year.<sup>5</sup>

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- Ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, post-traditional graduates reported having an average gross income of \$63,570, compared to \$75,818 for traditionally aged graduates.<sup>1</sup>
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.<sup>6</sup> Ten years after graduating:
  - 66.5% of post-traditional graduates reported owning a home, compared to 63.9% of traditionally aged graduates.<sup>1</sup>
  - 82.2% of post-traditional graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 87.4% of traditionally aged graduates.<sup>1</sup>

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- 55% of post-traditional students reported having dependent children, compared to just 15% of traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>
- Post-traditional students are more likely to be low-income and require financial assistance.<sup>5</sup>
- Post-traditional students are more likely to work and work longer hours while enrolled than traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>
  - 52.9% of post-traditional students worked full-time while enrolled, compared to 39.6% of traditionally aged students.<sup>5</sup>

## DATA SOURCES

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

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

<sup>3</sup>[Digest of Education Statistics](#). National Center for Education Statistics, December 2025.

<sup>4</sup>[Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#). National Center for Education Statistics, January 2026.

<sup>5</sup>[National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

<sup>6</sup>[Wealth Analysis FAQ](#). Urban Institute, 2021.