



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Public Four-Year Institutions

### HISTORY

Public four-year colleges and universities are institutions managed by publicly elected or appointed officials, funded primarily with public funds, and offering programs that last at least four years.<sup>3</sup> For most of these institutions, their primary degree awarded is a four-year bachelor's degree, though many also offer master's and doctoral degrees.<sup>3</sup> These institutions trace their roots back to the University of North Carolina, which was chartered as the first publicly funded university in 1789. Since then, public four-year institutions have grown exponentially, expanding to all 50 states and accounting for nearly half of all postsecondary student enrollment today.<sup>2</sup>

### FEDERAL FUNDING

- Public four-year institutions can receive federal funding under Title II, Title III, Title V, Title VI, Title VII, and Title VIII of the Higher Education Act (HEA), depending on eligibility requirements for specific programs.<sup>5</sup>
- Participating public four-year institutions also receive federal funding through Title IV student aid.<sup>5</sup>

### INSTITUTIONAL TYPE

- In 2024–25, there were 824 degree-granting, public four-year institutions located in all 50 states and six territories, with Texas (67), California (56), and Ohio (49) having the most institutions.<sup>2</sup>
  - This represents a 17.5% increase from 2014–15, when there were 701 institutions.<sup>2</sup>
- Of these 824 institutions, 102 have been designated land-grant institutions.<sup>2</sup>
  - 328 of the 824 institutions are designated as Minority-Serving Institutions or meet the federal criteria for such designations.<sup>2</sup>

### ENROLLMENT

- Total enrollment at public four-year institutions in fall 2024 was 9,849,220—about 50.1% of total enrollment at all institutions.<sup>2</sup>
  - This is up from 8,257,108 total enrollment at public four-year institutions in fall 2014—40.9% of total enrollment at all institutions.<sup>2</sup>
- At public four-year institutions, students were far more likely to be enrolled full-time than part-time.<sup>2</sup>
  - 66.7% of students at public four-year institutions were enrolled full-time, higher than the 60.6% of postsecondary students overall.<sup>2</sup>

## FINANCIAL AID

- 57.1% of students at public four-year institutions received Title IV federal student aid in 2019–20, compared to 54.9% of students overall.<sup>4</sup>
  - 39.1% of students at public four-year institutions received a Pell Grant in 2019–20, compared to 40.2% of students overall.<sup>4</sup>
  - 38.8% of students at public four-year institutions used federal student loans in 2019–20, compared to 34.3% of students overall.<sup>4</sup>
- Among students at public four-year institutions who received Title IV aid, the average total amount was \$7,689 in 2019–20. The average Pell Grant was \$4,406, and the average federal loan amount was \$6,402.<sup>4</sup>

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- In 2024, public four-year institutions awarded 1,298,258 bachelor's degrees, representing 66.4% of all bachelor's degrees awarded and 25.4% of overall degrees awarded.<sup>2</sup>
- 58.9% of students at public four-year institutions graduated within 150% of their expected time to degree, compared to 61% of similar students overall.<sup>2</sup>

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- Four years after receiving their degrees, graduates of public four-year institutions averaged a gross income of \$60,146. This is compared to an average gross income of \$57,252 for similar graduates overall.<sup>1</sup>
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.<sup>6</sup> Ten years after completing their degree:
  - 15.4% of public four-year graduates owned a home or were paying a mortgage, compared to 13.1% of all graduates.<sup>1</sup>
  - 74.1% of public four-year graduates had a retirement account, compared to 74% of all graduates.<sup>1</sup>

## DATA SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> [Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [IPEDS Data Collection System Glossary](#). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2025

<sup>4</sup> [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, February 2024.

<sup>5</sup> [The Higher Education Act \(HEA\): A Primer](#). Congressional Research Service, April 2023.

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