



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Transfer Students in Higher Education

POPULATION OVERVIEW

The concept of postsecondary transfer has its roots in the early 20th-century community college movement, when junior colleges were established to expand access to higher education. The growth of two-year institutions created a need for pathways that would allow students to continue their education at four-year institutions while receiving credit for prior learning.⁶ Early transfer arrangements were typically informal and limited to individual institutions—typically public, four-year universities—until the President’s Commission on Higher Education released a report, “Higher Education for American Democracy,” which called for broader, more systematic transfer pathways.³ In the decades since, many states and systems have developed formal articulation agreements and coordinated transfer policies to support student mobility. Today, transfer remains a central access and equity strategy, particularly with regard to credit loss, as it affects students’ ability to complete a degree efficiently.⁶

ENROLLMENT

- In fall 2024, nearly 1.3 million undergraduate students transferred into a new institution.⁵
 - While this is down from nearly 1.5 million transfers in 2014, it reflects the highest number of transfer students since 2019.⁵
- Among students who transferred into new institutions, 73% transferred to four-year institutions, while 27% transferred to two-year institutions.⁵
 - Of the 933,000 students who transferred to four-year institutions, 66.4% transferred to public institutions, 22.3% transferred to private nonprofit institutions, and 11.3% transferred to private for-profit institutions.⁵
 - Of the 344,000 students who transferred to two-year institutions, 91.6% transferred to public institutions, 6.3% transferred to private for-profit institutions, and 2.1% transferred to private nonprofit institutions.⁵
- In fall 2024, 59.5% of transfer students identified as female, while 40.4% identified as male.⁴
- In fall 2024, 59.9% of transfer students were enrolled full-time at their new institution, while 40.1% were enrolled part-time.⁵

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 31.6% of first-time postsecondary students who began at a community college in fall 2018 had transferred to a four-year institution within six years.⁷
 - Among students who transferred, 48.7% completed a bachelor's degree in that time frame.⁷
- Among students who enrolled in community college in fall 2018 with a history of dual enrollment, 45.4% transferred to another institution, and 58.6% completed a bachelor's degree.⁷
 - Among community college students who transferred from a community college to a public four-year institution in 2018–19, 71.2% completed a bachelor's degree within six years.⁷

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- Ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, students who successfully transferred some or all of their postsecondary credits to a four-year institution, and who reported having an income, averaged a gross income of \$49,242 compared to the average of \$42,765 for students who did not transfer any credits.¹

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Among students who applied to transfer between institutions via the Common App in 2024–25, 23% were age 23 or older, military-affiliated, or parenting students.⁴
 - These students disproportionately reside in lower-income ZIP codes and are likely to transfer more credits than traditional students.⁴
- Roughly 18% of students included in the 2022 Beginning Postsecondary Students Study (BPS:22) reported using transfer advising or planning services.²

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[Higher Education for American Democracy](#). U.S. Department of State President's Commission on Higher Education, December 1947.

⁴[Independent Applicants for Transfer Admission](#). Common App, January 2026.

⁵[Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#). National Center for Education Statistics, January 2026.

⁶[Recurring Trends and Persistent Themes: A Brief History of Transfer](#). The College Board, 2013.

⁷[Tracking Transfer](#). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, March 2026.