



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Distance Learners in Higher Education

### OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Department of Education, distance learners are students who participate in “education that uses one or more types of technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously.”<sup>4</sup>

### ENROLLMENT

- In fall 2024, 54.7% of students were enrolled in at least one distance education course.<sup>3</sup>
  - 26.5% of students were enrolled exclusively in online courses, while 28.2% were enrolled in one or more online courses alongside their in-person courses.<sup>3</sup>
  - This represents an increase from 2014, when 28.3% of students were enrolled in distance education, but a decrease from the 2020 peak,\* when 74.7% were enrolled in at least one such course.<sup>3</sup>
- In fall 2024, 10.9 million students were enrolled in at least one distance education course.<sup>3</sup>
  - 5.3 million students were enrolled exclusively in distance education courses.<sup>3</sup>
  - 5.6 million students were enrolled in some distance education courses, but not all.<sup>3</sup>
  - 9 million students were not enrolled in any distance education courses.<sup>3</sup>

### FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID

- In 2019–20, students who completed their entire degree program via distance education were slightly more likely than those who took some or no distance education courses to receive federal financial aid (54.9% vs. 55.9% and 52.9%, respectively), Pell Grants (43.2% vs. 41.7% and 37.4%), and federal student loans (35.5% vs. 35.1% and 33.5%).<sup>5</sup>
- Among students who completed their program entirely via distance education and received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the average amount of aid received was \$8,457.<sup>5</sup>
  - The average Pell Grant amount for these students was \$3,933.<sup>5</sup>
- Among students who completed at least one distance education course and received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the average amount of aid received was \$8,751.<sup>5</sup>
  - The average Pell Grant amount for these students was \$4,199.<sup>5</sup>

\*This 2020 peak occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many universities to move courses online.

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- Among students who first enrolled in 2011–12, those exclusively in distance education programs were less likely to complete their degree program by 2017 than students who enrolled in person.<sup>2</sup>
  - These effects were compounded by institutional control, with students at for-profit institutions less likely to complete distance learning programs.<sup>2</sup>

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- Four years after receiving a bachelor's degree in 2015–16, graduates who completed their entire program via distance education reported having an average gross income of \$59,972, compared with \$50,732 for students who completed at least one course via distance education and \$48,706 for students who did not complete any courses via distance education.<sup>1</sup>
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.<sup>6</sup> When 2007–08 graduates were surveyed 10 years after graduating:
  - Graduates who completed their entire program via distance education were substantially more likely to own a home than those who completed some or no distance education coursework (53.4% vs. 35.9% and 26.9%, respectively), while retirement account ownership was similar across all groups (74.3%, 74.5%, and 73.6%).<sup>1</sup>

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Distance education plays an important role in access to graduate programs.
  - Only 45.8% of graduate students enrolled exclusively in distance education are enrolled at an institution within their state/jurisdiction, compared to 67.1% of undergraduates.<sup>3</sup>
- 20.4% of degree programs offered allow students to complete some or all of their courses via distance education.<sup>3</sup>
  - 21.7% of associate, 14.5% of bachelor's, 33.3% of master's, and 13.4% of doctoral degree programs can be completed either entirely or partially online.<sup>3</sup>
- In fall 2024, 81.9% of students enrolled at private for-profit institutions were enrolled in at least one distance education course, far higher than the 55.2% at public institutions or the 46.2% at private nonprofit institutions.<sup>3</sup>
  - This percentage increases dramatically when limited to four-year institutions. 90.5% of students enrolled at private for-profit four-year institutions were enrolled in distance education, compared to 54.2% at similar public institutions and 46.1% at similar private nonprofit institutions.<sup>3</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> [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#). National Center for Education Statistics, January 2026.

<sup>4</sup> [IPEDS Glossary](#). National Center for Education Statistics, 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.