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.[4]
  - Male post-traditional students accounted for 12.3% of all postsecondary enrollment and 29.1% of all male postsecondary enrollment.[4]
  - Female post-traditional students accounted for 19.8% of all postsecondary enrollment and 34.4% of all female postsecondary enrollment.[4]
- Between Fall 2013 and Fall 2023, post-traditional student enrollment declined by 20.8% from 7.7 million to 6.1 million.[4]
  - Full-time post-traditional enrollment declined 19.6%, from 3.4 million to 2.7 million.[4]
  - Part-time post-traditional enrollment declined 20.6%, from 4.3 million to 3.4 million.[4]
- 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.[4]
  - 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.[4]
  - In Fall 2023, post-traditional students made up 74.5% of all for-profit enrollment.[4]

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.[5]
  - 48.9% of post-traditional students received a Pell Grant, compared to 39.4% of traditionally aged students.[5]
  - 32.1% of post-traditional students received a federal student loan, compared to 34.8% of traditionally aged students.[5]
- Among post-traditional students who received federal Title IV aid in 2019–20, the average amount received was $7,744.[5]
  - The average Pell Grant amount for post-traditional students was $3,808.[5]
  - The average federal loan amount for post-traditional students was $7,205.[5]
- 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.[2]

* 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.[2]
    - 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.[2]
- Post-traditional students represented 4% of all bachelor's degree completions in the 2019–20 academic year.[5]

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.[1]
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.[6] Ten years after graduating:
    - 66.5% of post-traditional graduates reported owning a home, compared to 63.9% of traditionally aged graduates.[1]
    - 82.2% of post-traditional graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 87.4% of traditionally aged graduates.[1]

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

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

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, December 2025.
[4] Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. National Center for Education Statistics, January 2026.
[5] National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.
[6] Wealth Analysis FAQ. Urban Institute, 2021.