

Mapping Postsecondary Pathways:

Understanding State Student Enrollment Trends

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Receiving [additional education](#) after high school equips people with the skills and credentials they need to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market and a financially demanding economy. Without a [degree or credential](#), people may struggle to advance in their careers or find employment opportunities that offer family-sustaining wages. Yet despite efforts to diversify educational pathways, [significant gaps](#) in postsecondary success remain. Educational attainment has [increased for all students](#) over the last decade, but fewer than a quarter of people aged 25 and older complete a bachelor's degree. [Black and Latino](#) students make up a growing share of those enrolled at colleges and universities; 1 in 5 are Latino, and 1 in 8 are Black. Yet, Black and Latino students remain vastly underrepresented at four-year colleges and have lower degree completion rates than other racial or ethnic groups — with Black and Latino [six-year completion rates](#) for the fall 2017 cohort at 43.4% and 50.1%, respectively, compared to 68.5% for their white counterparts. Financial constraints, the high cost of college, and disproportionate student debt burdens are the primary reasons for these disparities. A 2022 EdTrust report noted that the [racial wealth gap](#) leaves Black families with fewer resources to repay student debt after college.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and the current political climate have only made matters worse. During the pandemic, inflation led to rising tuition and increased living costs, further compounding the financial burden for Black and Latino students. Community colleges, often the most accessible institutions for these learners, experienced significant enrollment declines and are still in recovery.

These challenges will be exacerbated by the passage of the Trump administration's so-called "[One Big Beautiful Bill](#)," which hurts universities' bottom lines and curbs college access by slashing federal financial aid through tighter restrictions on Pell Grant eligibility, caps on federal student loans, and the elimination of most income-driven repayment plans. These provisions disproportionately harm Black and Latino students, especially part-time, low-income, and community college students, who rely heavily on financial aid and student loans to afford a postsecondary education. Combined with the [administration's attacks](#) on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and [immigrant protections](#), the administration's actions could put college further out of reach for thousands of current and future students or force them to turn to costlier private loans.

States have made efforts [to boost degree attainment](#) — often by setting ambitious postsecondary completion goals. But in the wake of the end of [race-conscious admissions](#), they must be more intentional about increasing access, enrollment, and postsecondary completion rates for Black and Latino students if they're going to meet their goals. This is especially important as the population identifying as [two or more races](#) may be the fastest-growing racial-ethnic group over the next few decades. To assist with these efforts, our brief analyzes six years of enrollment data from the 2018-19 academic year to the 2023-24 academic year for all 50 states, providing a clearer picture of who is enrolling, particularly Black and Latino students, and where these students are enrolling.

Why more high school teens are questioning the value of a bachelor's degree

Rising tuition costs, concerns about student debt, and the belief that the juice may not be worth the squeeze when it comes to college are leading more young people to question the value of a [bachelor's degree](#). In a 2024 nationwide survey of over 3,000 youths in grades 7-12 conducted by [American Student Assistance](#), just 45% of teens viewed attending a two- or four-year college as their most likely next step, down from 73% in 2018. Additionally, the survey showed that interest in completing a non-college program, such as vocational or trade school, increased by 9% from 2018 to 2024.

While [short-term credentials](#) (STC), including college-level certificates and industry credentials that typically take one year or less to complete, are becoming increasingly popular as more accessible and affordable postsecondary options compared to traditional degrees, the jury is still out on whether they're a good value.

To determine whether these programs live up to their promise of being more affordable, EdTrust examined their actual costs. The team first calculated the [cost of attendance](#) for short-term credential programs to understand how expenses vary across different types of training and durations. We found that the cost of attendance [varies widely](#) among providers, and many programs still require financial aid, as the calculated hourly cost of attendance significantly exceeds the minimum wage in many states.

This means that, although credentials are often portrayed as affordable alternatives, they may still be out of reach for learners with low incomes and no degree.

The team also wanted to know more about how student and institutional patterns are shifting and where better data and stronger policy are needed to help more Black and Latino students reach their postsecondary goals. Examining enrollment trends over time provides insights into how students and colleges are changing. This information can assist states and higher education leaders in setting ambitious and equitable attainment goals, implementing data-driven interventions, and ensuring that more Black and Latino students can not only access but also successfully complete a postsecondary education.

What we know about recent enrollment trends

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center's [fall 2024](#) enrollment report shows that total undergraduate enrollment has increased by 4.7% since fall 2023, but hasn't yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

In 2020, public two-year undergraduate enrollment experienced the largest decline, dropping by [8.9%](#) and losing over 400,000 students. Enrollment has still not returned to the 2019 peak of over [5.3 million students](#). However, public two-year undergraduate enrollment has shown consistent growth recently. For example, enrollment increased by 4.9% (over 200,000 students) from fall 2023 to fall 2024. And [a spring 2025 NSC report](#) found a significant rise in enrollment at community colleges this spring, noting that high-vocational public two-year institutions have specifically driven the growth in public two-year enrollment since 2020.

Community colleges are a key access point for postsecondary education, serving as a gateway to higher education for many students, particularly those who are underserved. Both the fall 2024 and spring 2025 reports highlighted significant enrollment growth among Latino, Black, Asian, and multiracial students.

While the NSC reports are helpful for understanding annual enrollment shifts, examining trends at the national and state levels over six years provides additional insights. Analyzing state-by-state trends enhances our understanding of how targeted policy interventions can address local and regional attainment challenges. States have unique educational goals tied to workforce demand, demographic realities, and economic factors that influence enrollment and completion rates, making state-specific breakdowns essential for measuring progress toward attainment goals.

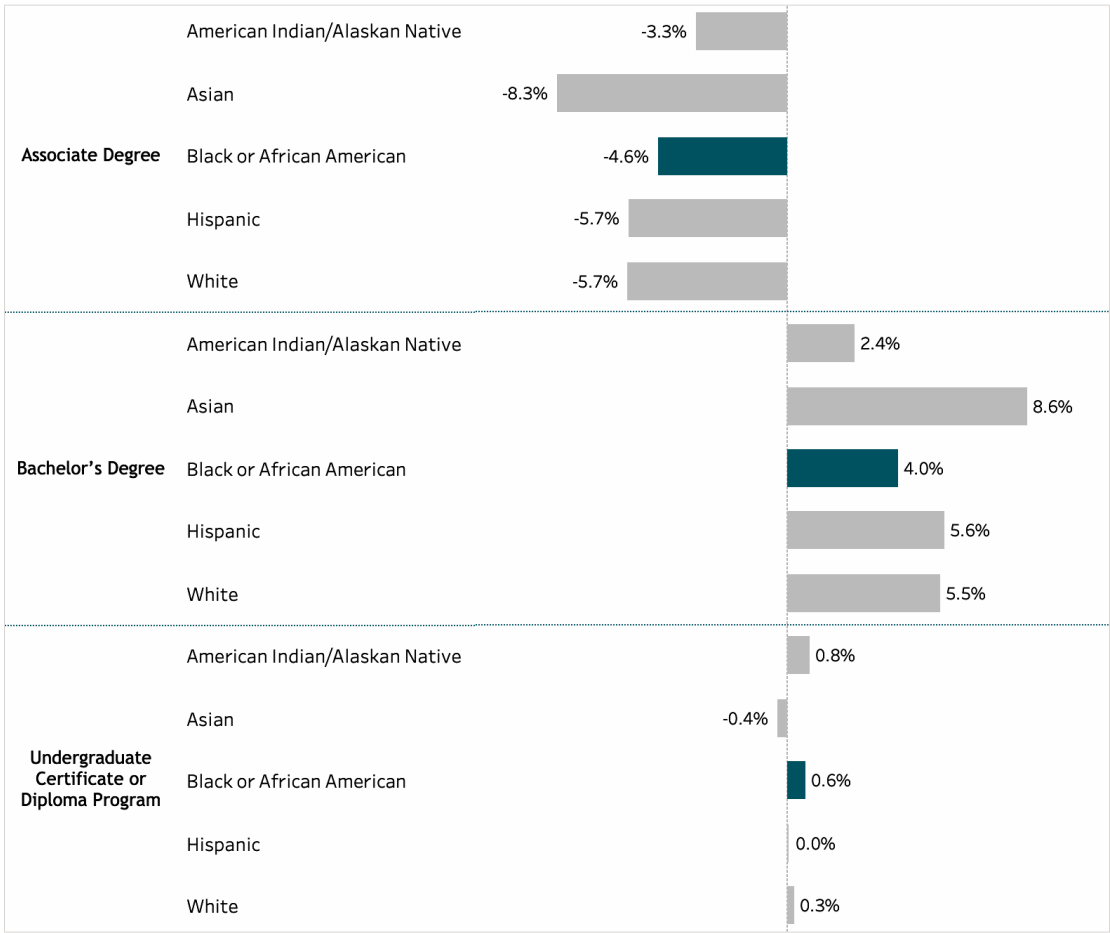
EdTrust analyzed six years of college enrollment data from the NSC, covering the period from 2018-19 to 2023-24, and found trends similar to those reported by NSC in fall 2024. Additionally, our team examined how enrollment varies across states, degree types, sectors, and racial groups, while also considering [state attainment goals](#). Here's what we found.

The majority of Black and Latino students continue to enroll in public institutions. ... In the 2023-24 academic year, 76% of Black students and 84% of Latino students enrolled in public institutions

Key Findings

Black and Latino enrollment in bachelor’s degree programs has grown significantly. Data shows that enrollment in four-year institutions continues to outpace that in two-year institutions. EdTrust found that undergraduate bachelor’s degree enrollment has increased since 2018 for Black (4.0%), *Hispanic (5.6%), and Asian (8.6%) students. While our findings show an increase for Asian students, there is a need to [disaggregate the data](#) to more accurately represent students from Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander backgrounds. [Research](#) shows that Southeast Asian American students face barriers to college access and success that parallel those experienced by Black and Latino students, and these barriers are more pronounced than those faced by other Asian American students.

Figure 1: National Degree Enrollment Differences, 2018-19 to 2023-24



Source: EdTrust [analysis](#) of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) enrollment data from 2018-19 and 2023-24.

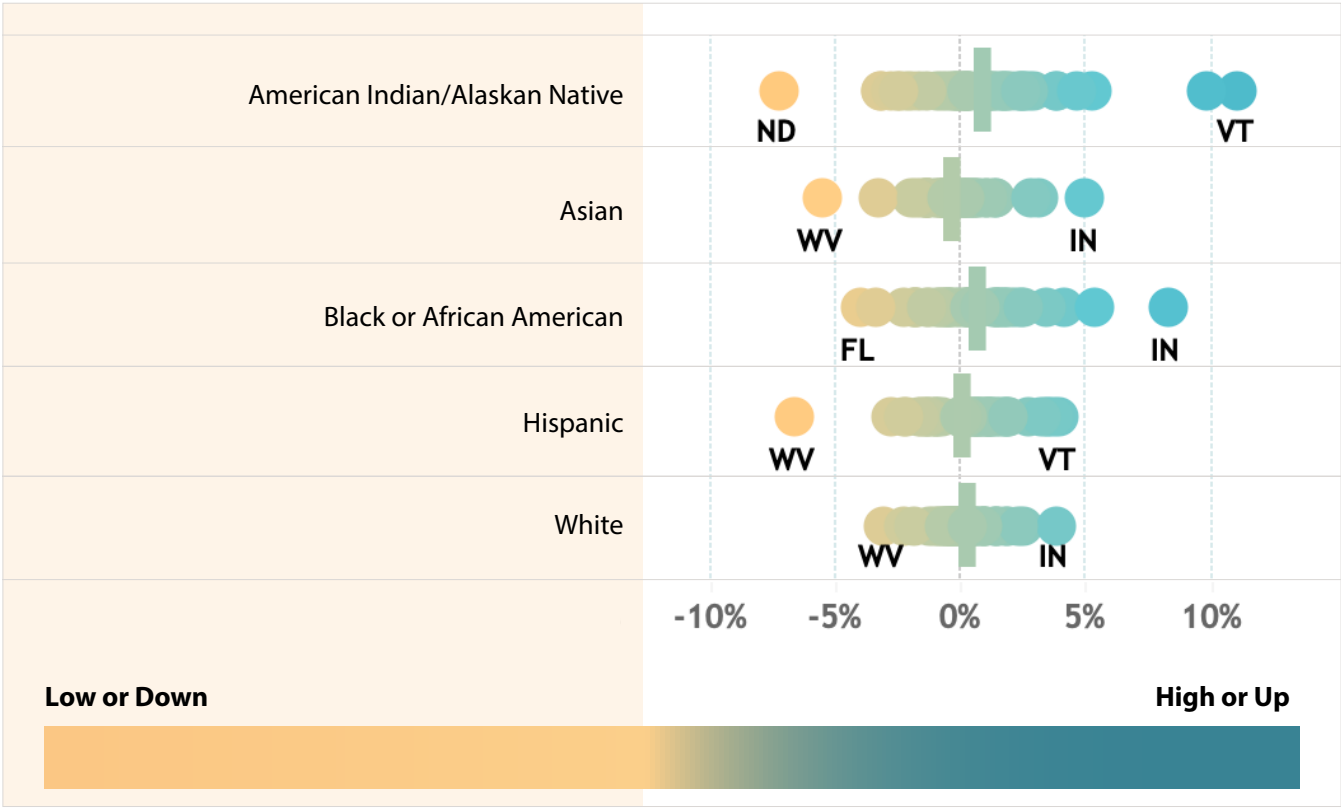
White student enrollment also rose by 5.5% between the 2018 and 2023 school years, despite [recent declines](#) in the enrollment of affluent white students. Since 2012, white undergraduate enrollment has decreased by more than 2 million students. However, white students still comprise the [majority of those enrolled](#) in higher education. Even without a postsecondary credential, white individuals are often more likely than their Black and Latino peers to earn a [family-sustaining wage](#). To close persistent racial and ethnic gaps in attainment and wealth, states and institutions must continue to invest in proven strategies that [strengthen enrollment and career pathways](#), especially for students from historically underrepresented communities who have long faced barriers to education and economic opportunity.

Enrollment in certificate programs is growing but varies significantly by state. While the national uptake of short-term credentials for all races and ethnicities reflects a change of less than 1%, examining individual states may tell a different story. Most states didn’t exhibit notable growth in certificate enrollment, but some did have increases over time, particularly among Black and Latino students.

For example, Indiana had the greatest increase in certificate enrollment among American Indian (9.8%), Black (8.3%), Asian (5.0%), Hispanic (3.5%), and white students (3.8%). In contrast, in West Virginia, Hispanic enrollment in certificate programs declined by 7%, while enrollment among Black students increased by only 1%. However, enrollment in bachelor’s degree programs rose for both populations in West Virginia, with an increase of 9.2% for Hispanic students and 3.3% for Black students.

Although national-level growth in certificate enrollment seems minimal, state-level data reveals meaningful variation, suggesting that students may be choosing different educational pathways depending on the state context.

Figure 2: Percentage Differences in Short-Term Credentials, 2018-19 to 2023-24



Source: EdTrust [analysis](#) of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) enrollment data from 2018-19 and 2023-24.

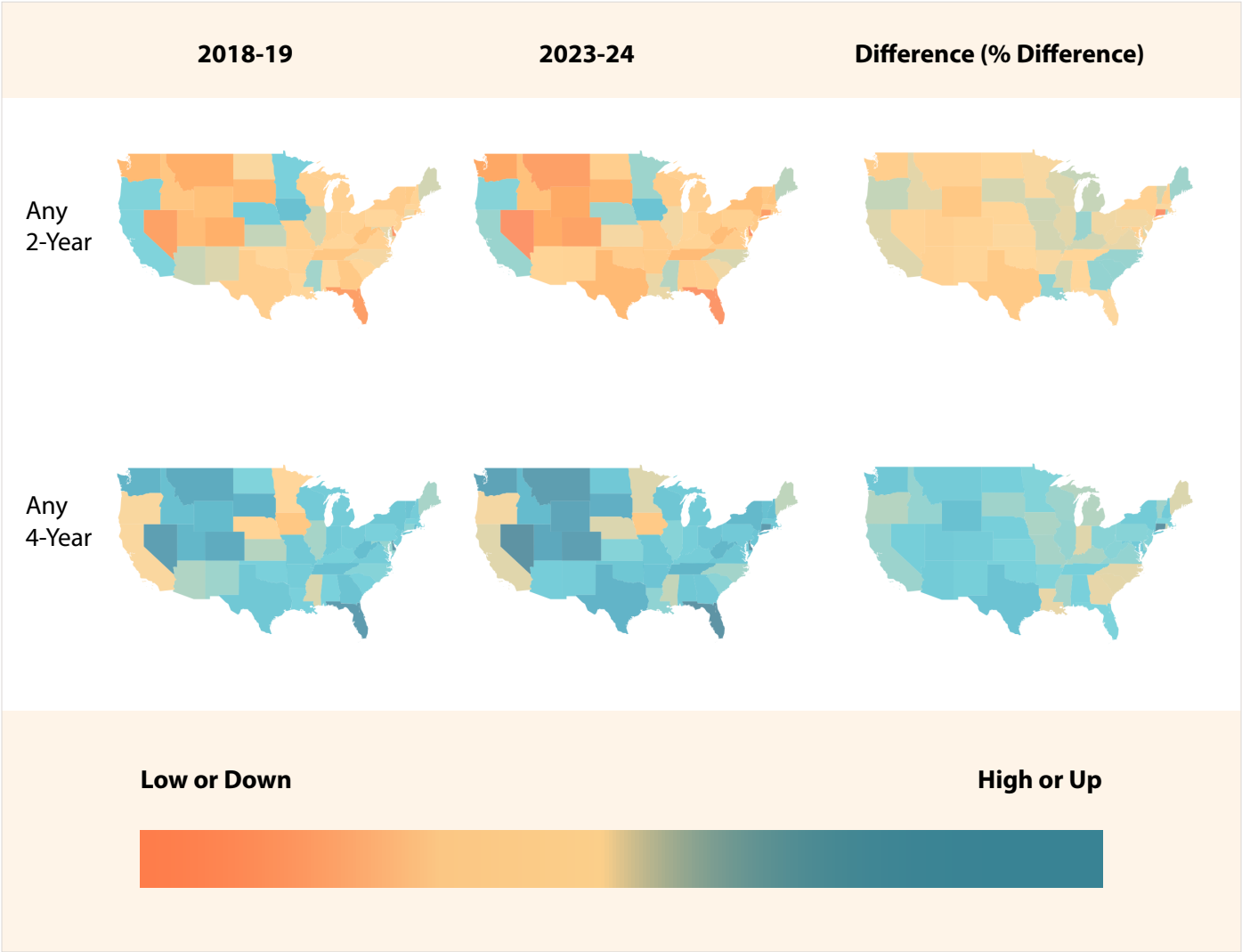
Community college enrollment is still recovering. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, community college enrollment has [steadily declined](#) for [various reasons](#), such as students pursuing degrees at four-year institutions, choosing alternative learning pathways, or forgoing higher education altogether. A 2021 [report](#) suggests that the main reasons students left community college were financial strain — including account holds, rising tuition costs and living expenses — as well as inflexible course scheduling.

Historically, [community colleges](#) have served students of color, first-generation students, and those from low-

income backgrounds as a means of providing educational access and economic mobility, since many four-year institutions were either [inaccessible](#) or [unaffordable](#) (a situation that still holds true today). Today, Black and Latino students are [overrepresented](#) in community colleges while remaining [underrepresented](#) at more selective colleges and universities.

Some states, however, have experienced large swings in enrollment. For example, Connecticut showed a 35% decrease in enrollment for Black students at two-year institutions, but conversely, it experienced a 35% increase in enrollment for Black students at four-year institutions.

Figure 3: Percentage Differences in Two- and Four-Year Black Student Enrollment, 2018-19 to 2023-24

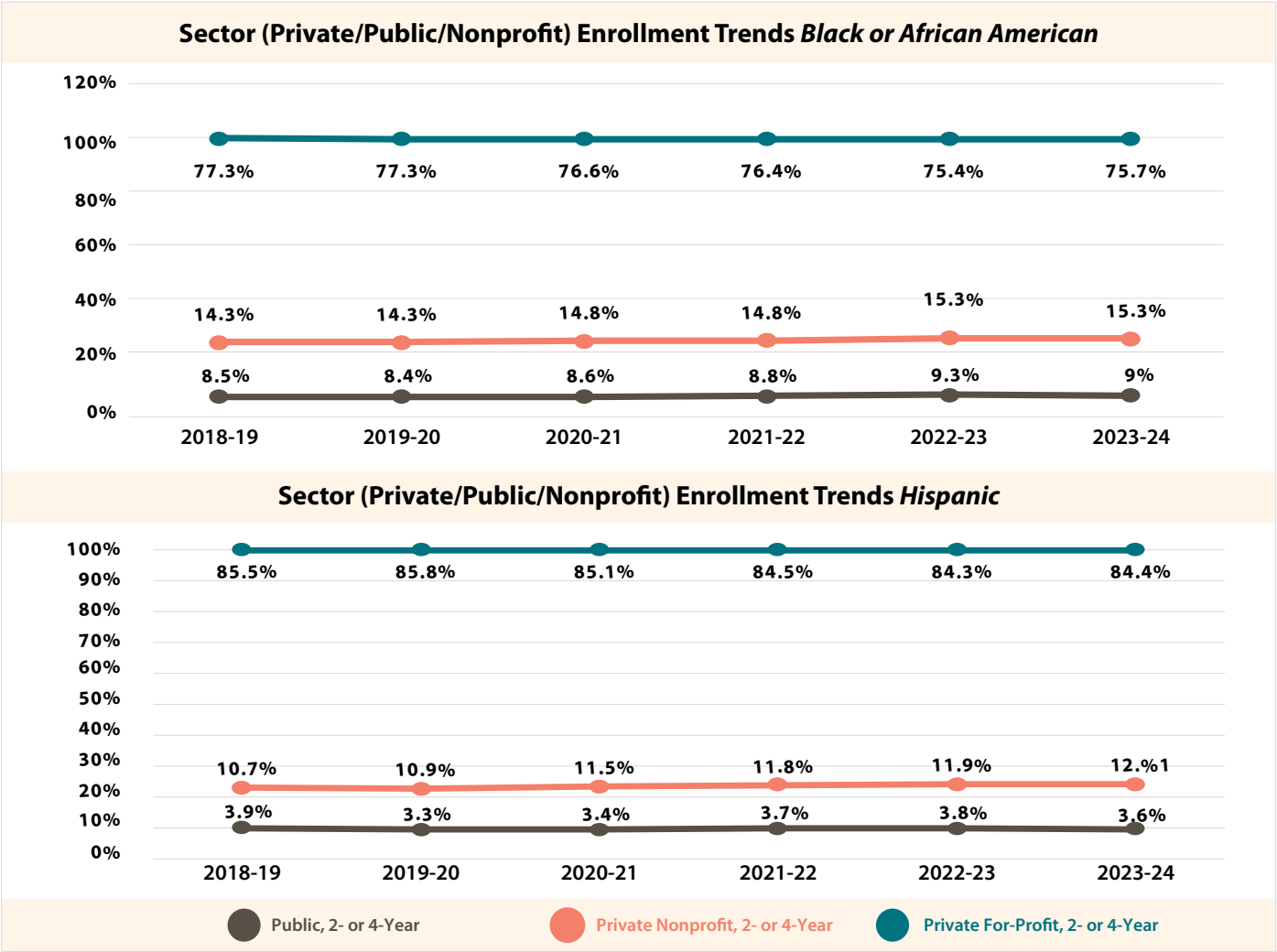


Source: EdTrust [analysis](#) of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) enrollment data from 2018-19 and 2023-24.

Most Black and Latino students are still choosing to attend public institutions. Our analysis revealed that while most states experienced an increase in enrollment at private colleges and universities, the majority of Black and Latino students continue to enroll in public institutions. Nationally, private sector enrollment for Black, Hispanic, and white students increased by less than 2% from 2018 to 2023. In the 2023-24 academic year, 76% of Black students and 84% of Latino students enrolled in public institutions.

[Public postsecondary education](#) continues to play a significant role in reducing socioeconomic inequality by providing opportunities for students from diverse and low-income backgrounds to access education, acquire skills, and ultimately break the [cycle of poverty](#).

Figure 4: National Enrollment Trends for Black and Latino Students, 2018-19 to 2023-24



Source: EdTrust [analysis](#) of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) enrollment data from 2018-19 and 2023-24.

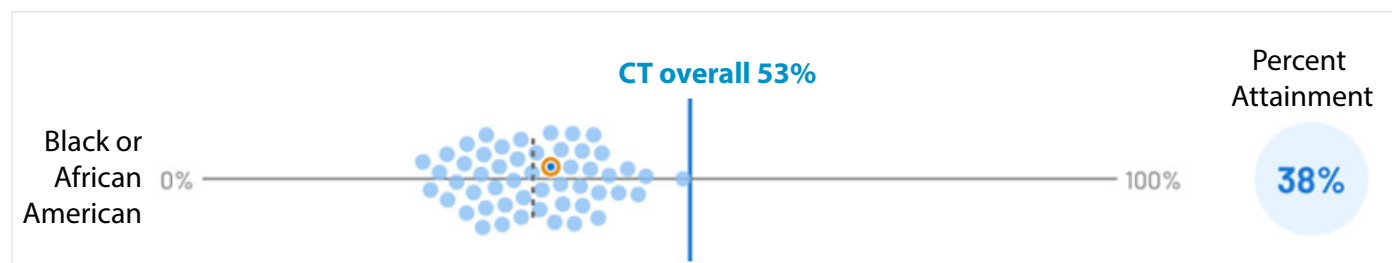
Gauging progress toward state attainment goals

When state higher education leaders understand enrollment trends, they can intentionally set educational attainment goals in collaboration with colleges and universities that benefit students, families, and communities.

In addition to [national attainment goals](#) for each state, the Lumina Foundation provides a [framework](#) that many states use to set their own degree attainment benchmarks.

Connecticut, for example, aims to ensure that [at least 40% of adults](#) hold four-year degrees by 2025. In 2022, 37% of the state's adult learners had a college degree. Connecticut's initiatives, such as [dual enrollment](#), [funding support](#), and [enhanced recruitment and retention efforts](#), may enable the state to meet that goal. To meet future targets, the state might focus its efforts on bolstering completion support, especially for underrepresented groups. For example, Black student enrollment in bachelor's degree programs in Connecticut increased by 31%, but Black attainment in the state remained at 38%, just below the state goal of 40%. This suggests a need for strategies that not only improve access but also focus on persistence and degree completion for Black students.

Figure 5: Black Degree Attainment in Connecticut
2021-23 three-year estimates, ages 25-64, excluding short-term credentials



Source: Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation Credentials of Value Report: Connecticut (2023)*.

Additionally, while our data shows that student enrollment is rising at four-year institutions, only a handful of states have [seen growth](#) in two-year enrollment. In [Louisiana](#), overall enrollment at two-year institutions has gradually increased since 2021, with Black student enrollment in associate degree programs up nearly 3 percentage points and Latino student enrollment up nearly 2 percentage points in 2023, while bachelor's degree enrollment at four-year institutions remained stagnant over this same period. Similarly, states like Florida and Indiana have seen a subtle increase in their two-year enrollment over the past few years.

Enrollment trends highlight key shifts that may influence states' ability to meet future attainment goals.

Our findings underscore the need for more rigorous data collection on credential and certificate enrollment and attainment, as well as a greater focus on developing, funding, and supporting pathways. While there may be increased interest and enrollment in certificate programs in some states, the overwhelming majority of Black and Latino students are still choosing to enroll at public, four-year universities.

The [demand for skilled trade workers](#) is growing, but enrollment in these pathways does not seem to align with that demand. There is a pressing need for clear messaging and information about high-quality short-term credentials, associate degree pathways, and bachelor's degree pathways.

Additionally, strategically highlighting, supporting, and strengthening community colleges — not only as workforce training centers but also as key transfer pathways to four-year institutions — could be crucial in addressing workforce shortages. Given that community college graduates are likely to remain in their local communities and contribute to the [regional economy](#), strengthening these institutions is essential for meeting both regional workforce needs and state attainment goals.

Recommendations

Progress in expanding college access and success requires strong collaboration between K–12 and higher education institutions, alongside coordinated policy efforts at the district and state levels. The trends in college enrollment combined with policy shifts under the current administration — particularly the impacts of initiatives like Trump’s One Big Beautiful Bill — pose serious challenges. Tighter restrictions on Pell Grant funding, reduced support for [federal TRIO programs](#), reduced efforts to [simplify the FAFSA](#), and a shift away from [equity-driven accountability](#) threaten to reverse hard-won gains. These rollbacks risk widening opportunity gaps, especially for low-income and first-generation students and undermine the shared commitment of making college accessible and affordable to all students. Below are recommendations for institutional and state leaders based on our findings.

For Institutions

- 1. Institutions can implement financial strategies to improve college affordability for students.** This can include expanding targeted financial-aid packages, developing emergency-aid funds and/or need-based grants, and adopting debt-free pathways for eligible students. Institutions should also provide more financial-aid education to help students make better-informed decisions regarding their funding options. Making college affordable helps reduce the [cost burden for low-income students](#), increasing college access and improving degree attainment.
- 2. K-12 and postsecondary institutions can strengthen students’ preparation for higher education by aligning their college- and career-readiness goals.** Even though high school curricula and requirements prepare students for graduation, they are not always [aligned with college admission standards](#), like California’s A-G [requirements](#). Expanding [dual enrollment programs](#) and [pre-college initiatives](#) (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, and summer bridge programs) ensures that students graduate feeling prepared for college-level work and needing less [remediation](#). Districts and institutions should also show prospective students the value of a degree or credential to encourage postsecondary attainment, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds.
- 3. Institutions can invest in more integrated and student-centered support systems to improve postsecondary attainment.** Districts and institutions should look to expand evidence-based wraparound services such as early-warning systems, tutoring, and social-emotional learning supports. Data shows that these [interventions](#) can promote readiness and help students prepare both academically and personally for college. State and federal leaders and policymakers should prioritize funding and scaling these holistic approaches, especially in communities with lower college attainment rates.

For States

1. States can enhance their data infrastructure and improve the collection of short-term credential data to clarify the value of postsecondary credentials. States are making progress in improving tracking by collecting data through [state longitudinal data systems](#). But there is a pressing need to use this data to inform learners and families about the [quality of non-degree credentials](#) and to better capture workforce-aligned education. Additionally, sharing data on wages, incomes, and employment [across states](#) could create an environment that highlights valuable credentials in different regions and ultimately tailors programs to meet local economic and workforce market needs.

Given the [increasing popularity](#) of short-term credentials, both learners and higher education practitioners need to know which credentials hold the most value — that is, which ones are in demand and lead to a family-sustaining wage. [The Lumina Foundation's newest attainment priorities](#) reflect the importance of defining “[credentials of value](#)” by connecting education with labor demands and ensuring that these fields provide incomes above the average for high school graduates. With the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the [expansion of Workforce Pell](#) now offers an opportunity to fund high-quality, short-term programs that align with these labor market needs, making it even more critical to identify and promote credentials that lead to sustainable careers.

2. States can use recent data trends to create more dynamic and targeted goals. All 50 states have [improved](#) their overall educational attainment for adults, with six states reaching the goal of having 60% of adults hold a credential by 2025. However, the [national degree attainment](#) rate, excluding short-term credentials, remains at an average of 47%. Disparities persist, with Black adults (36%) and Latino adults (30%) lagging their white peers (52%).

Rather than applying a single attainment target across all racial and ethnic groups, states should set differentiated goals that account for current starting points. For example, increasing Black adult attainment from 36% to 46% and Latino attainment from 30% to 41% over the same timeframe would reflect equitable progress relative to each group's baseline, rather than expecting all groups to reach the same numeric goal by the same date. This approach ensures that targets are ambitious yet achievable, and that progress is measured in a way that meaningfully closes gaps without setting unrealistic expectations for populations starting from lower attainment levels. It also encourages states to [design policies](#) that support specific student groups, such as Black students, Latino students, or those with some college but no degree.

3. States can use enrollment data to drive student success and improve policy alignment. Analyzing [enrollment data](#) allows institutions and state agencies to pinpoint where students may need extra support to persist in their educational journeys. This also allows states to work toward [aligning high school graduation requirements](#) with state college enrollment requirements. With this information, states and institutions can develop initiatives to address students' nonacademic needs, such as mental health and financial stability, ultimately leading to improved educational attainment. For example, using enrollment data in conjunction with tools such as the National College Attainment Network's (NCAN) [Common Measures](#) and the Education Strategy Group's (ESG) [Momentum Metrics](#) frameworks can help states target their resources toward learners at risk of [stopping out](#) and bring back adults with [some college](#) credits but no degree.

Ultimately, postsecondary attainment goals should ensure that degrees and [high-quality, short-term credentials](#) serve as viable pathways to economic mobility and strengthen the state economy. This can be accomplished by making data understandable and accessible, investing further in state data collection, [quantifying](#) racial and other demographic attainment gaps through disaggregation, and providing additional institutional and student supports to community colleges and local organizations.

About the Data

In this brief, we use data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the Lumina Foundation to analyze postsecondary enrollment trends from the 2018-19 academic year to the 2023-24 academic year for all 50 states. Our analysis focuses on six-year enrollment differences by degree level and sector, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, to identify state-level disparities. *Please note that at EdTrust, “Latino” and “Latina” are the preferred terms for people from Latin America. However, we’ve opted to use “Hispanic” in some instances because that is the term used by the National Student Clearinghouse. For a closer look at the data and methods behind this analysis, explore our [interactive dashboard](#).