

## NORTH CAROLINA

## OVERVIEW

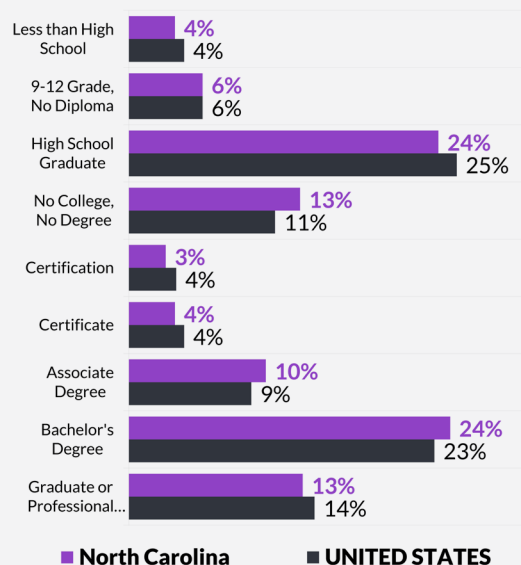
Education is a pathway to economic and social mobility for people across the country, and higher education can be a crucial step along the way. The education continuum ranges from birth, through early learning opportunities, pre-kindergarten, and K-12 education. Higher education, also called postsecondary education, is the bridge that many students cross between their K-12 education and entry into the workforce.

Though there was a time when a high school diploma could secure stable employment that enabled workers to buy homes and support families, the modern economy typically requires employees to have some form of education beyond high school to have similar opportunities in today's economy. By 2031, 72 percent of all jobs in the U.S. are expected to require some form of education beyond high school, making higher education more important now than ever.

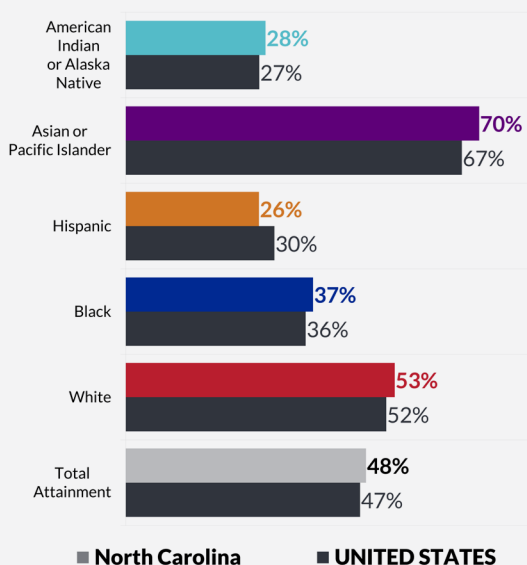
## Postsecondary Attainment

Over the past decade, policymakers and higher education leaders have made strides in raising the overall postsecondary attainment rate by over 16 percentage points, but racial equity gaps and students with some credits but no degree or credential still exist. **As of fall 2024, undergraduate enrollment grew 4.7 percent for a total of 16 million students, just slightly below 2019 numbers.** Inequities such as disparate funding for institutions serving larger proportions of students of color, systemic racism in the admissions process, barriers to financial resources for undocumented students, and lack of intentional student support for students of color all contribute to racial gaps in attainment rates.

## North Carolina Postsecondary Attainment by Credential Type



## North Carolina Postsecondary Attainment by Race/Ethnicity



Data Source

Data Source

48%

of individuals in North Carolina  
have a postsecondary degree or credential.

Data Source

## NORTH CAROLINA

## Postsecondary Pathways

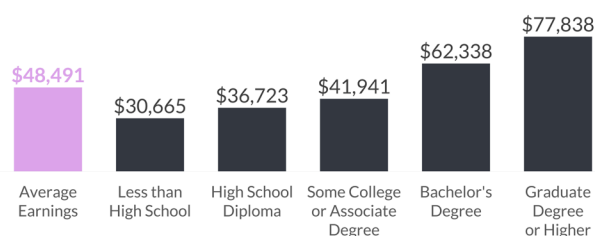
As the demographics of higher education and workforce needs continue to change, there is a growing recognition of the value different types of credentials provide for students. **Postsecondary pathways are the varying opportunities students may pursue to become college and career ready** and are often associated with increased median wages.

The full scope of postsecondary pathways includes:

- **Workforce Training Programs:** A program that focuses on learning or upgrading basic skills in order to enhance job performance, promote career development, or train for a new job.
- **Industry Credentials:** Vocational certifications, licenses, or badges that are recognized by local, state, or national business and industry partners. Industry credentials help prepare individuals to work in a specific industry, often in an entry-level position and/or advance their career through skill mastery. These credentials typically are not for college credit but may be evaluated by colleges and universities for awarding credit for prior learning.
- **Certificates:** Awards that usually require less than one or two years to complete and prepare individuals for middle-skill jobs (such as nurses and welders). These short-term credentials quickly prepare individuals for jobs that are important to local economies. Many certificates can be applied toward a higher-level certificate or degree, such as an associate degree.

These credentials build, or stack, upon one another, which allow students to use prior knowledge and continue their education at their own pace.

### North Carolina Median Earnings by Postsecondary Attainment Credential Type



### Data Source

- **Associate Degrees:** An undergraduate academic program that aims to give students basic knowledge and skills that can be used toward employment or further study. Most associate degrees can be conferred in two years and are often completed at a community college.
- **Bachelor's Degrees:** Undergraduate academic degree awarded by a college or university usually after four years of study. A bachelor's degree is a prerequisite for further courses in graduate education.
- **Graduate Education:** Academic or professional degrees, certificates, diplomas, or other qualifications pursued by postsecondary students who have earned an undergraduate degree. Graduate education provides students with more advanced learning in a specialized discipline making them an expert in that topic of study.

## POSTSECONDARY LANDSCAPE

North Carolina is home to 133 institutions of higher education. These institutions include:

58

2-Year Public Institutions

Data Source

17

4-Year Public Institutions

48

4-Year Private Nonprofit Institutions

9

For-Profit Institutions

In total, North Carolina serves 553,180 postsecondary students

39%

are enrolled at 2-Year Public Institutions

Data Source

44%

are enrolled at 4-Year Public Institutions

16%

are enrolled at 4-Year Private Nonprofit Institutions

&lt;1%

are enrolled at For-Profit Institutions

## ACCESS

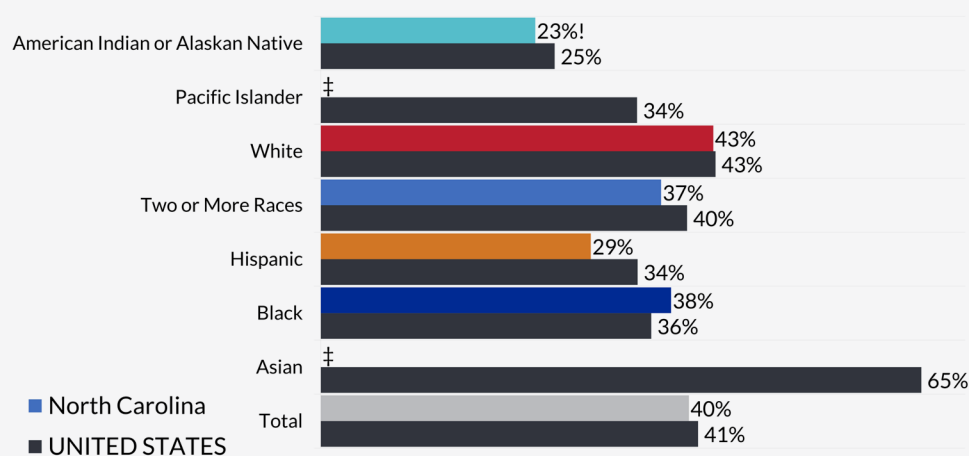
A traditional college student is generally considered to be someone who enrolls in college full time immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on their parents, and does not work while attending college. Today, higher education serves an increasingly diverse student population.

Below are some examples of specific student populations who may face unique barriers to higher education:

|                                          |                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>First-Generation Students</i></b>  | Students who are the first person from their family to attend higher education.                                                                   |
| <b><i>Employed Students</i></b>          | Students who are employed full time while enrolled in postsecondary education.                                                                    |
| <b><i>Adult Learners</i></b>             | Students who are over the age of 24.                                                                                                              |
| <b><i>Student Veterans</i></b>           | Students who have served in a branch of the military.                                                                                             |
| <b><i>Students with Disabilities</i></b> | Students with an emotionally, intellectually, or physically disabling condition, which requires assistance to access the educational environment. |

When it comes to the percentage of students that enroll in higher education, there are gaps between the enrollment rates across different student subgroups. For those ages 18 to 24, Asian and white students have higher [postsecondary enrollment rates](#) than their Black and Hispanic counterparts. Black students have been and continue to be [underrepresented at more selective colleges](#), while white and Asian students tend to be overrepresented.

### North Carolina 18- to 24-Year-Olds Enrolled in Postsecondary Institutions



#### Data Source

**Note:** ‡Reporting standards not met. Either there are too few cases for a reliable estimate or the coefficient of variation (CV) is 50 percent or greater.  
! Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent.

**-4%  
CHANGE**  
in [higher education  
institution enrollment](#)  
between 2010-2020.



[Data Source](#)

## NORTH CAROLINA

## Minority-Serving Institutions

For decades, the United States Department of Education has worked to increase postsecondary attainment rates for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Indigenous students. An integral component of this work is [Minority-Serving Institutions \(MSIs\)](#), who serve students from any racial/ethnic background, but are eligible for federal funding to intentionally support their student population. While MSIs represent [19 percent](#) of postsecondary institutions in the nation, MSIs enroll [34 percent](#) of all college students and

over [50 percent](#) of all students of color. There are [nine](#) main types of Minority-Serving Institutions, each with unique designation requirements, often based on undergraduate enrollment and percentage of students from low-income backgrounds. Based on Third Way's Economic Mobility Index (EMI), HSIs make up over a third of the [top 20 percent](#) of institutions in regard to economic mobility. Previous studies have also shown that MSIs are drivers of economic mobility, as low-income students attending an MSI have [two to three times higher economic mobility rates](#) than students at non-Minority-Serving Institutions.

### NORTH CAROLINA IS HOME TO 96 MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING:

| NUMBER    | INSTITUTION TYPE                                                   | DESIGNATION REQUIREMENTS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>0</b>  | Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISIs) | Institutions who enroll at least 10 percent total full-time enrollment of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander undergraduate students.                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>0</b>  | Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHs)     | An Alaska Native Serving Institution is an institution whose full-time undergraduate student population is at least 20 percent Alaska Native.<br>A Native Hawaiian-Serving Institution is an institution whose full-time undergraduate student population is at least 10 percent Native Hawaiian.     |
| <b>3</b>  | Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)                               | Institutions whose full-time undergraduate student population is at least 25 Hispanic. Institutions must also serve a higher proportion of low-income or first-generation students.                                                                                                                   |
| <b>10</b> | Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)               | Institutions developed with the primary purpose of education Black Americans. HBCUs are predominantly located in the southeast region of the United States.                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>2</b>  | Native American-Serving, Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs)          | Institutions whose full-time undergraduate student population is at least 10 percent Native American.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>2</b>  | Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)                            | Institutions whose full-time undergraduate student population is at least 40 percent Black. Institutions must also serve a higher proportion of low-income or first-generation students.                                                                                                              |
| <b>79</b> | Strengthening Institutions Program (SIPs)                          | Institutions who are state designated to be a junior college or provide an educational program in which it awards a bachelor's degree and at least 50 percent of its full-time undergraduate population is eligible for need-based assistance, the Pell Grant, and have low educational expenditures. |
| <b>0</b>  | Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)                            | Institutions who are being controlled and operated by federally recognized American Indian tribes.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

## NORTH CAROLINA

## STUDENT SUPPORT

Once on campus, many students require academic and non-academic support to succeed. Wraparound services were founded on the medical practice of **systems of care**, in which medical providers such as doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, and social workers coordinate their practices to support the patient in a holistic manner. Similarly, **wraparound services** in higher education refers to holistic support to ensure a student's full range of needs are addressed. This can include academic, health, socioemotional, familial, financial, and logistical support.

The availability of wraparound services can be the determining factor in whether a student accesses higher education and/or persists toward their degree or credential. Many students, such as first-generation and/or adult learners, experience barriers to higher education that wraparound services can help to address. One **study** by the University of Chicago Inclusive Economy Lab (formerly the Poverty Lab) found that offering such services to community college students increased full-time enrollment by 13 percent and increased retention from one term to the next by 11 percent. Institutions use two main measures to determine if students are successful during their higher education journey:

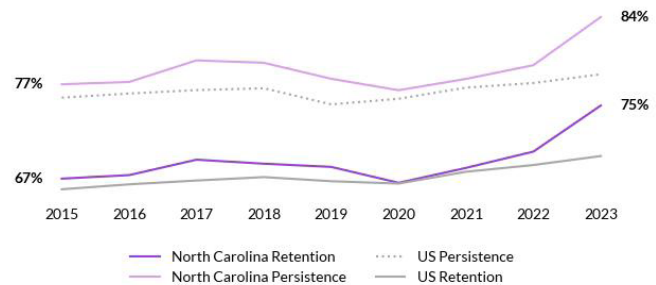
## Retention Rates

- Retention rates measure the percentage of students who are continually enrolled at the **same** higher education institution through the fall semesters of their first and second years.

## Persistence Rates

- Persistence rates measure the percentage of students who are continually enrolled at **any** higher education institution through the fall semesters of their first and second years.

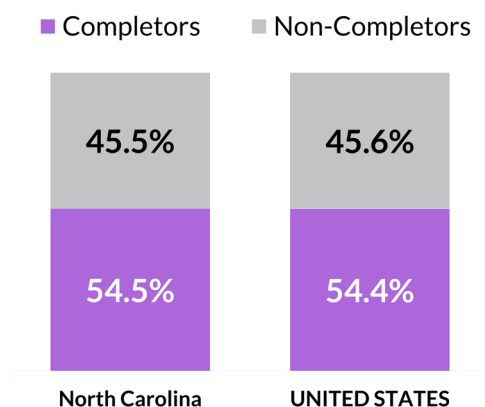
## North Carolina Postsecondary Retention and Persistence Rates



Data Source



### Percentage of North Carolina High School Seniors Who Completed FAFSA\*



12th grade enrollment: **55%**

State Rank: **15**

North Carolina left **\$137,169,331**  
Pell Grant Dollars on the table in 2023.

[Data Source 1](#) [Data Source 2](#)

## AFFORDABILITY

### FAFSA Overview

The [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) is a form used to determine how much and what kind of financial aid students and their families are eligible to receive from the federal government. Students are required to complete the FAFSA in order to determine eligibility for funding such as Pell Grants (which do not have to be repaid), Federal Student Loans, and the Federal Work Study Program. States also use the FAFSA to determine eligibility for state financial aid.

The [FAFSA Simplification Act](#), which passed in December 2020 as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, makes several changes to the application, effective Academic Year 2024-2025, in order to better serve students:

- Streamlines the FAFSA form and creates a new interface that directly retrieves tax information from the IRS.
- Replaces the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) with the Student Aid Index (SAI) to help colleges better understand students' needs, while also enabling financial aid offices to better articulate aid packages to families.

- Expands access to federal aid by linking eligibility to family size and the federal poverty level.
- Returns eligibility for Pell Grants to students who are incarcerated.
- Eligibility restored for students who were misled by schools or whose schools closed while enrolled.

While the FAFSA serves as a gateway to financial aid, it is estimated that the high school class of 2022 [left over \\$3.5 Billion of unclaimed financial aid on the table](#). By providing support services to students, states can ensure more students have access to the funds necessary to pursue postsecondary education.



NORTH CAROLINA



The Rising Cost of College

One distinction to keep in mind when discussing the cost of higher education is the difference between an institution’s so-called “sticker price” and the actual out-of-pocket costs that students and families pay. The sticker price refers to the tuition that an

institution charges for each student. However, there are a number of other factors that determine what a student actually pays to access higher education, including student aid (grants and loans), mandatory fees, and living expenses related to housing, food, and transportation costs.

| NORTH CAROLINA AVERAGE COST OF ATTENDANCE BY INSTITUTION TYPE |                            |                            |                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|                                                               | 2-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS | 4-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS | 4-YEAR PRIVATE NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS |
| In-State Tuition and Fees                                     | \$2,527                    | \$7,327                    | \$40,176                              |
| Room and Board                                                | -                          | \$11,533                   | \$13,908                              |

Data Source

Public Higher Education Funding

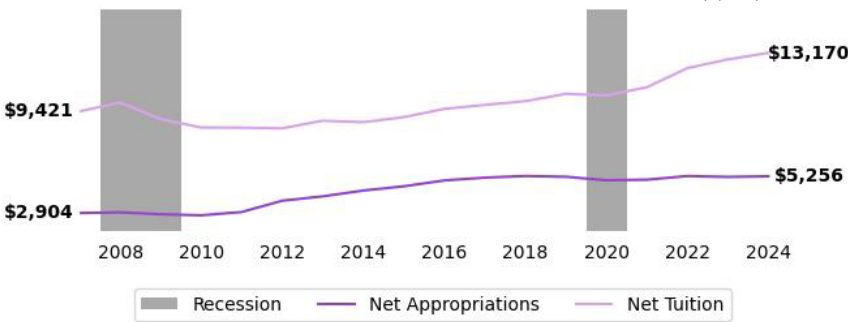
Another important factor to consider is that many public higher education institutions receive state funding. The national average state higher education funding per- full time enrolled (FTE) student increased by 0.8 percent in 2024, surpassing pre-pandemic funding levels by 17.9 percent. However, even with 2020 federal stimulus funds allocated to states; the state funding of public institutions across many states has still decreased since 2001, a high point for state higher education funding.

The graph below shows how higher education appropriations per student have changed over the last decade. For the vast majority of states, decreases in state funding have resulted in students and their families having to pay more in net tuition—often referred to as the student share of higher education

costs. One of the largest factors affecting the cost of postsecondary education is a state’s investment in higher education. State funding helps decrease the tuition burden placed on students. While most states have invested more heavily in higher education in recent years, when adjusted for inflation, funding levels are still below pre-2008 economic recession levels. Lagging investments by states has created higher tuition rates and lower financial aid offerings, which shifts the burden of cost onto students, which leads to more student debt or students simply choosing not to pursue higher education because of cost.

Percentage of State Appropriations and Tuition Per Full-Time Enrolled Student in North Carolina

45% Increase in state tuition since 2014      28% Increase in state appropriations since 2014



Data Source

## NORTH CAROLINA

## Student Aid Programs

Below is a breakdown of important terms and distinctions for discussing student aid programs:

- Student aid can come in the form of **grants**, which **do not** need to be repaid, or **loans**, which **do** need to be repaid along with interest.
- There are both **public** and **private** student aid loan programs. Public loan programs often have fixed repayment rates and consumer protection policies, whereas private loan programs have repayment rates that can vary over time and fewer consumer protection policies.
- In addition to the federal student aid programs, every **state** offers **grant and loan programs**. Eligibility for most state student aid programs is limited to state residents who attend a college in-state, and the award amounts are generally lower than those for the federal aid programs.
- The most common federal student aid programs include [Pell Grants](#), [Work-Study Jobs](#) and [Parent PLUS Loans](#).

■ *\$29 billion in federal student loan debt comes from North Carolina***\$38,695**

Average Amount of  
Student Loan Debt in  
North Carolina

**8**

North Carolina's National  
Ranking for Average  
Amount of Student Loan  
Debt

**13%**

Percentage of  
North Carolina Residents  
with Student Loan Debt

**18**

North Carolina's National  
Ranking for Percentage  
of Residents with  
Student Loan Debt

[Data Source](#)

