Choosing the *Right* College

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Choosing the *Right* College

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Choosing which college to attend is one of many tough decisions students face on their path to attaining a college degree. If they have the right information, then young people are more likely to follow through to complete college. For example, this report found many students who are identified as low-income overestimate the cost of college by as much as 200%. That price tag often prevents them from applying to more selective schools where they would have a greater chance of completing their degree.

One important strategy is to help students find colleges that match and fit their preferences in terms of academics, college selectivity, cost, program offerings, location, and other needs. Every organization along the educational pipeline and the labor market can institute policy initiatives that ensure students are not missing out on success in college because they didn't have the right information.

Introduction and Context of the Report

Unfortunately, a large percentage of first-year college freshman never make it to their second year at the school where they initially enrolled, opting to transfer colleges or drop out entirely. In San Diego County, out of approximately 20,000 first-year college students, nearly 4,500 do not return to for their second year at that school. To put these numbers into context, in a classroom of 20 college-going students, five will not continue into a second year at the intuitions where they began their college careers. And over the next six years of their college journey, only seven out of the 20 students will complete a degree.

Some may argue that college is a time for exploration, and students should be able to change institutions, especially if the institution chosen does not match the student's needs. However, it should be noted that changing colleges or taking time off has tangible consequences in terms of the time it takes to complete a degree, the cost of completing a degree, and whether they complete a degree in general (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, racial minorities and students who are socio-economically disadvantaged are far less likely to remain in the college where they first enrolled compared to other student groups (O'Keeffe, 2013). These statistics can change; dropping out or changing colleges may be a largely avoidable problem while the student is in high school.

Although many factors contribute to students leaving or dropping out of college (academic performance, financial aid, medical issues, and others), one of the most common reasons for it is a mismatch between the high school student and the institution they attend (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). The mismatch occurs because students may not have the information they need to determine the academic, financial and social fit of a college before enrolling. For example, Javier, a recent college transferee to CSU Long Beach, enrolled at the University of California, Davis because it was the college with the lowest cost of attendance. Unfortunately, Javier learned that UC Davis is also one of the least diverse UC campuses and offered limited opportunities to connect with others like him. Amani chose to attend Palomar College, a two-year community college, right out of high school because of its proximity to home. However, Amani dropped out of Palomar College after realizing she needed an environment where she felt a sense of

belonging versus a campus serving a larger percentage of high transfer, part-time students. Amani, like Javier, enrolled in a college that was a poor fit for what she needed. A good match school mediates many of these issues and creates an environment where the student has the best chance of completing.

San Diego County loses 4,500 students each year in the college retention pipeline. We can do more as a community to ensure we match students to the best college and increase students' odds of completing a degree. This report is designed for school and district leaders responsible for college and career readiness and college access. It contains countywide information about college readiness, college enrollment, persistence, and completion, and describes the state of college retention across San Diego County along with the strategies and practices that ensure students enroll in colleges where they have the greatest chance of succeeding. The primary goal of this report is to examine the factors that help students remain on track for college completion along with the practices that greatly reduce the barriers to completing a college degree efficiently.

We divided this report into three sections. The first section summarizes key findings across several areas of interest including seamless college transition rates, persistency, and degree attainment. Section two describes outcomes for higher education institutions with the highest attendance of San Diego County student, where we paid special attention to institutional retention. Section three identifies conclusions and recommended actions that address challenges raised by the findings.

Available Data Elements

We compiled several different sources of data to conduct the analyses. The primary data source is the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). The NSC StudentTracker service is a nationwide source of college enrollment and degree data from over 3,600 colleges and universities. The StudentTracker data set allows researchers at the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) to know the number and percentage of students who enroll, persist, and complete college annually. It also aids in understanding each student's college pathway (i.e., each college attended, enrollment status, and major) and degree attained.
See **https://studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/studenttracker/** for additional information.

Another rich source of data compiled for this report is the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard. The College Scorecard provides in-depth information about the cost and value of colleges and universities, information about student debt, borrowing amounts, employment and earnings information after degree completion, and many other characteristics. College Scorecard data are available at **https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/data/**.

The final data source compiled for the report is the California Department of Education's (CDE) downloadable data and research files. CDE makes a variety of data files available to educators and researchers. These files include school accountability and performance data, assessment information, student background data including percent of students meeting UC and CSU college entrance subject requirements, post-secondary preparation, and others.
See **https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/dd/** for additional information.

Section I: Key Findings

Countywide Results

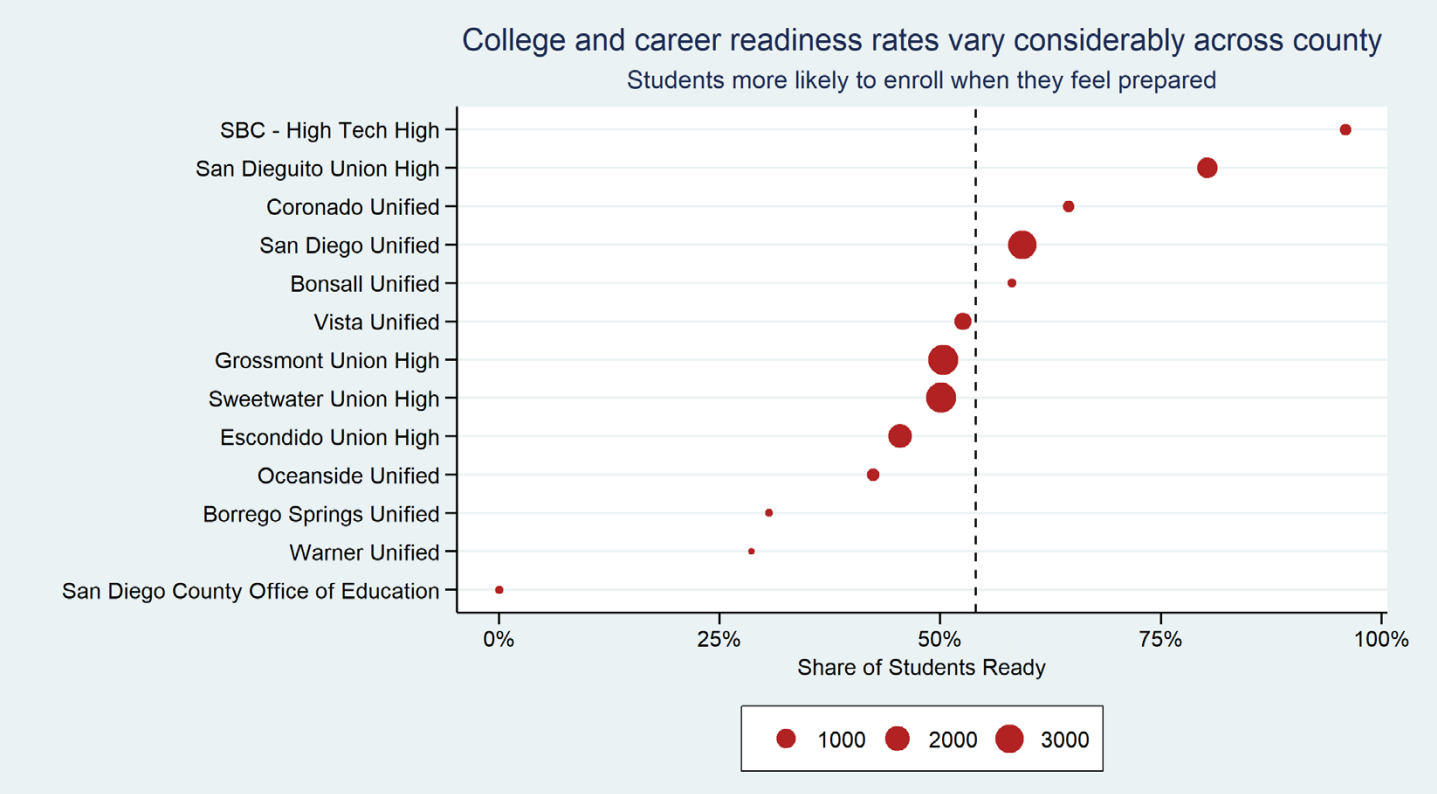
This first section of the Choosing the Right College report examines countywide progress in terms of college and career readiness, college enrollment, persistence, and completion.

College and Career Readiness

College and career readiness remains steady across high schools. We define college and career readiness as the "prepared" level on the California College and Career Indicator (CCI). College completion is often dependent on academic preparation in high school, among other factors.

About five in 10 San Diego County high school graduates are ready for college according to the CCI. The share of prepared students declined slightly from 58% in 2019 to 54% in 2020. Figure 1 shows the percentage of college-ready students in each school district. The size of the district's bubble represents the number of college-and career-ready students enrolled in college. For example, High Tech High only has 200 students but nearly all graduated college-and-career ready? Grossmont Union High, on the other hand, graduated over 3000 students and half of them completed high school college-and-career-ready.

FIGURE 1. Rates of College and Career Readiness in San Diego County



Seamless Enrollment

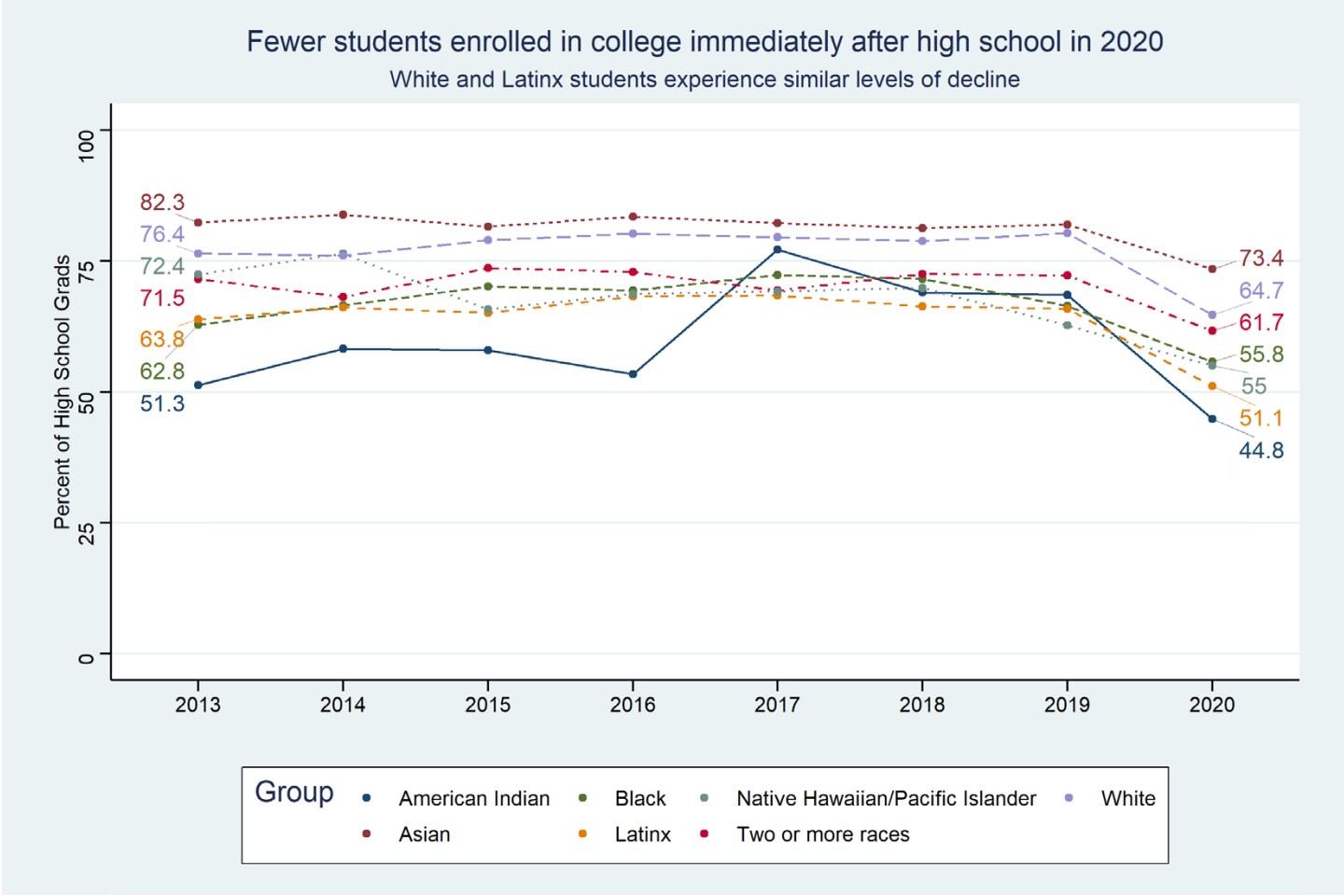
College enrollment declined significantly in 2020. We define seamless enrollment as the percentage of high school graduates enrolled in college the fall immediately after high school graduation.

Only six in 10 San Diego County high school graduates (60%) immediately enrolled in college in 2020 compared to 7 in 10 in 2019. Enrollment rates were split equally with 30% attending two-year institutions and 30% attending four-year institutions. The pandemic deeply affected college enrollment rates across the nation and in San Diego. About 4,500 students chose not to enroll in post-secondary education compared to the year before.

Seamless Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity

The pandemic resulted in steeper declines in enrollment for certain student groups. The enrollment of students who are white and Latinx declined the most during the pandemic. White student enrollment declined 15 percentage points from 80% in 2019 to 65% in 2020, while Latinx student enrollment declined 14 percentage points from 66% to 51%. Asian student and Black student enrollment declined 9 and 10 percentage points respectively. Asian student enrollment declined from 82% to 73%, while Black student enrollment declined from 66% to 56% in 2020. American Indian students declined almost 7%, while English learners (not graphed) experienced the steepest declines, where enrollment rates dropped 33 percentage points from 56% to 23% in 2020.

FIGURE 2. College Enrollment Rates in San Diego by Race and Ethnicity



Persistence

College persistence rates remained largely unchanged for all student groups in 2020. We define college persistence as the percentage of students enrolled in college in the first year after high school graduation who returned to any college for a second year.

Approximately 90 out of every 100 San Diego County high school graduates who enrolled in college in their first year after graduating high school in 2019 returned for a second year in 2020. Students are more likely to persist at four-year institutions (95%) compared to two-year (79%).

Completion

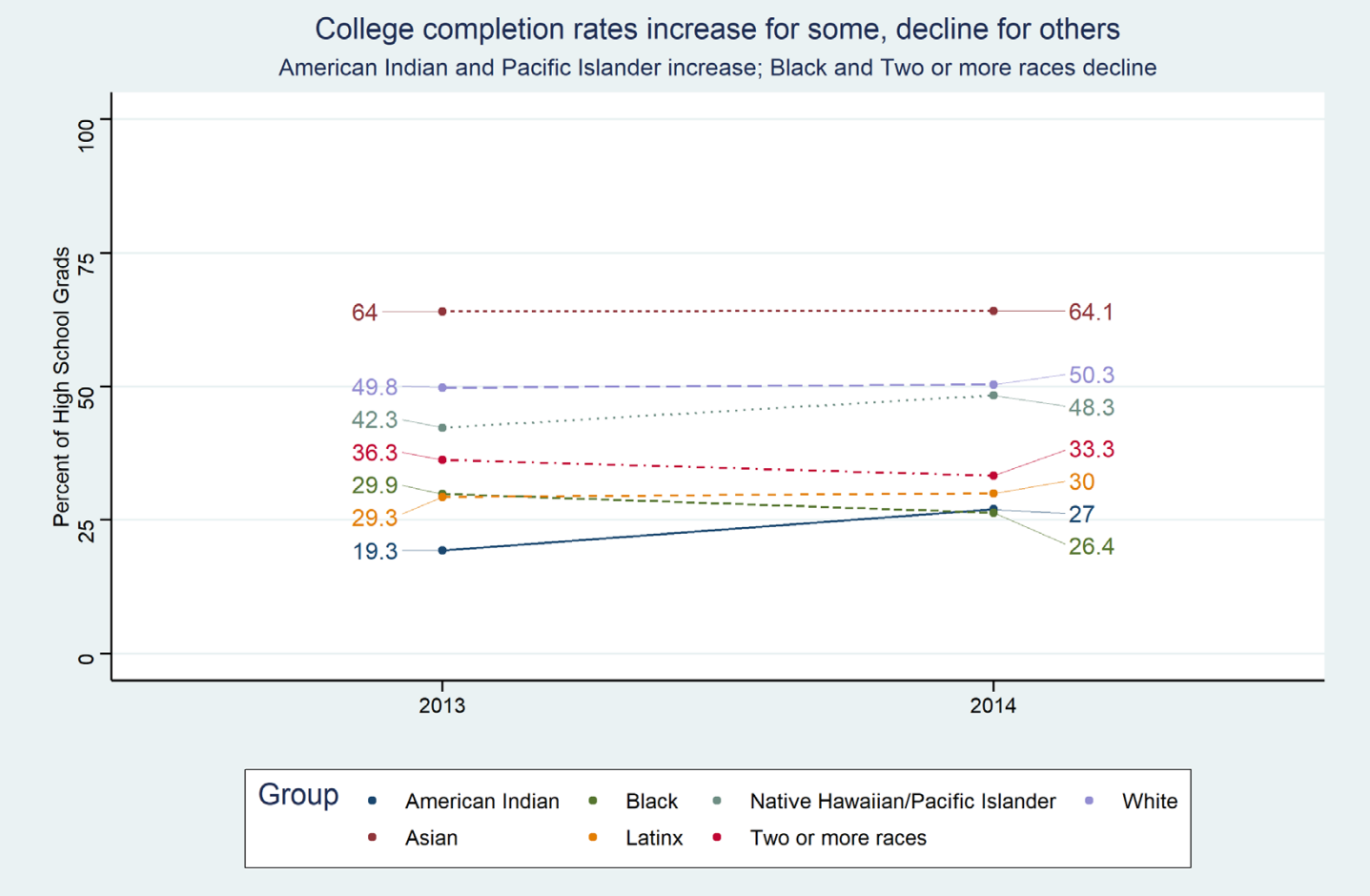
College completion rates reached an all-time high across the county. We define completion rates differently for two- and four-year institutions. For four-year institutions, completion is the percentage of students completing a degree within six years. For two-year institutions, completion is the percentage of students completing a degree within three years or transferring to a four-year institution. For this analysis, the report looks at a six-year completion rate for four-year institutions and a three-year completion rate for two-year institutions.

The college completion rates for 2014 high school grads from two- and four-year institutions was 39% in 2020 up from 37% in 2018. A thirty-nine percent completion rate represents the highest percentage of graduates in the 29 year history of tracking these data. Additionally, students attending four-year institutions were more likely to complete (32%) compared to two-year attendees (7%).

Completion Rates by Race and Ethnicity

Completion rates across student groups remained largely unchanged. Two notable exceptions include American-Indian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, who both experienced 8% and 6% increases respectively. White students (50%) are more likely to complete compared to African American (26%) and Latinx students (30%). Students who are low income (27%) and English learners (20%) are the least likely to complete (not graphed). Additionally, completion rates for Black students declined four percentage points from 30% in 2019 compared to 26% in 2020.

FIGURE 3. College Completion Rates in San Diego County by Race/Ethnicity



Section II: Postsecondary Progression

A college education is one of the most robust ways to achieve upward social mobility. That is to say, every year of education beyond high school is worth nearly $6,000 more in annual income. Additionally, a college graduate earns $20,000 more annually than a high school graduate (U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 2017).

Section II of the Choosing the Right College report is focused on the 25 top-attended higher education institutions by San Diego County high school graduates. Eighteen of the top 25 colleges are four-year institutions mainly located in California, while seven are local community colleges.

Institutional Enrollment

San Diego County reported 26,514 high school graduates in the National Student Clearinghouse in 2020. Of the graduates, approximately 15,964 matriculated mostly to the 25 colleges and universities shown below. San Diego County high school graduates actually enroll in over 750 colleges; however, many of these colleges enroll only a handful of students. We report on the 25 colleges and universities where enrollment exceeded 50 students.

FIGURE 4. Number of San Diego High School Graduates Enrolled in College by Institution

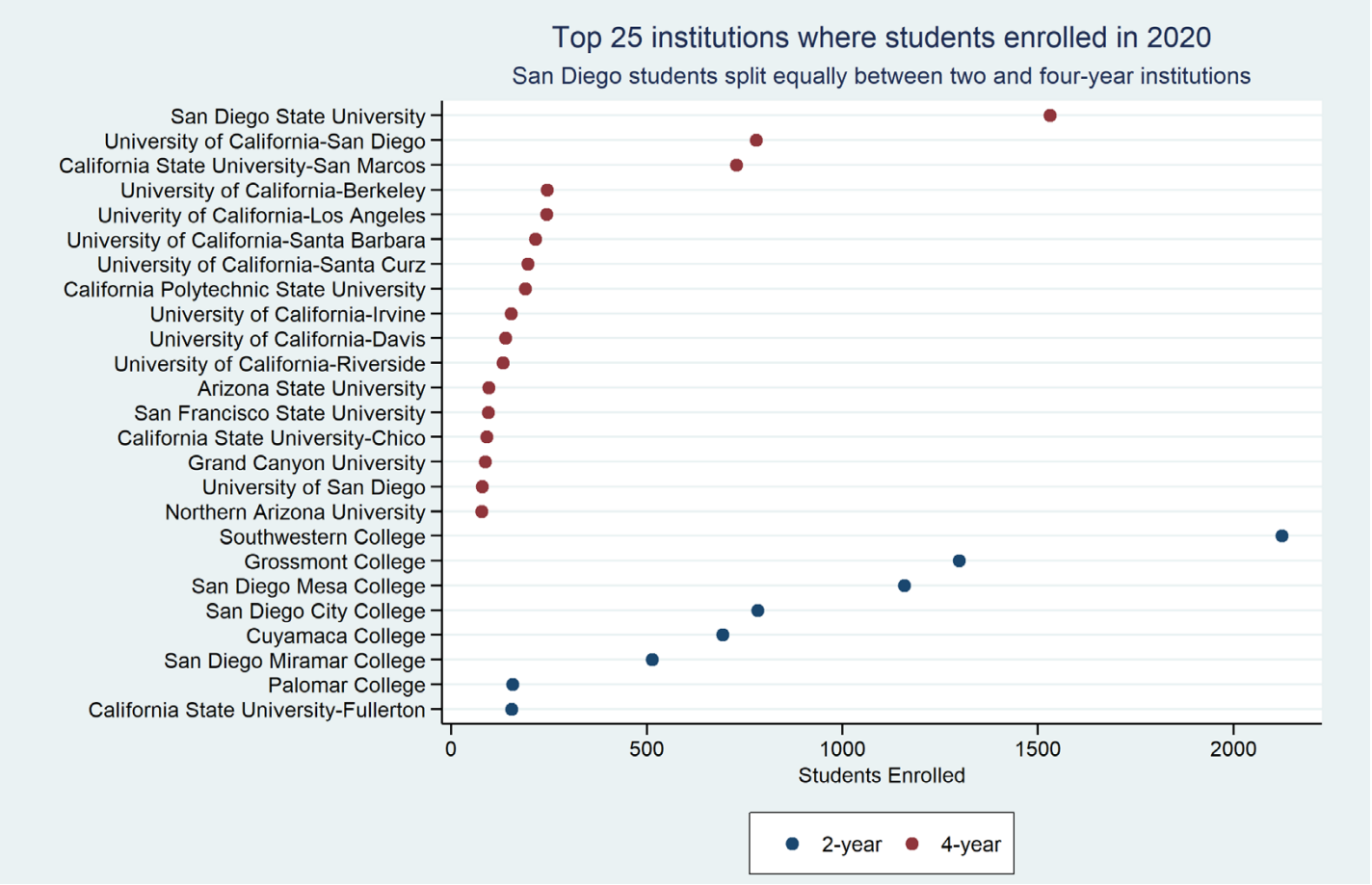


Figure 4 depicts enrollment rates for the most highly attended institutions. More students San Diego State University (1,694) and Southwestern College (2,491) than other institutions in 2020. Approximately 8,044 (50%) students enrolled in four-year colleges, while 7,920 (50%) enrolled in two-year. Nearly all students enrolled in public colleges and universities (91%) within-state (88%).

Preparedness Rates across San Diego High Schools

Completion of "a-g" course requirements has increased substantially in the last decade from 35% to more than 48% in 2020. Additionally, the CCI shows that about 54% of all San Diego County high school graduates are prepared for college and career. The graphic below clearly illustrates the effects of these college readiness efforts. When students are ready for college and career, they enroll in college at higher rates.

FIGURE 5. The Relationship between College and Career Readiness and College Enrollment Arrayed by High School

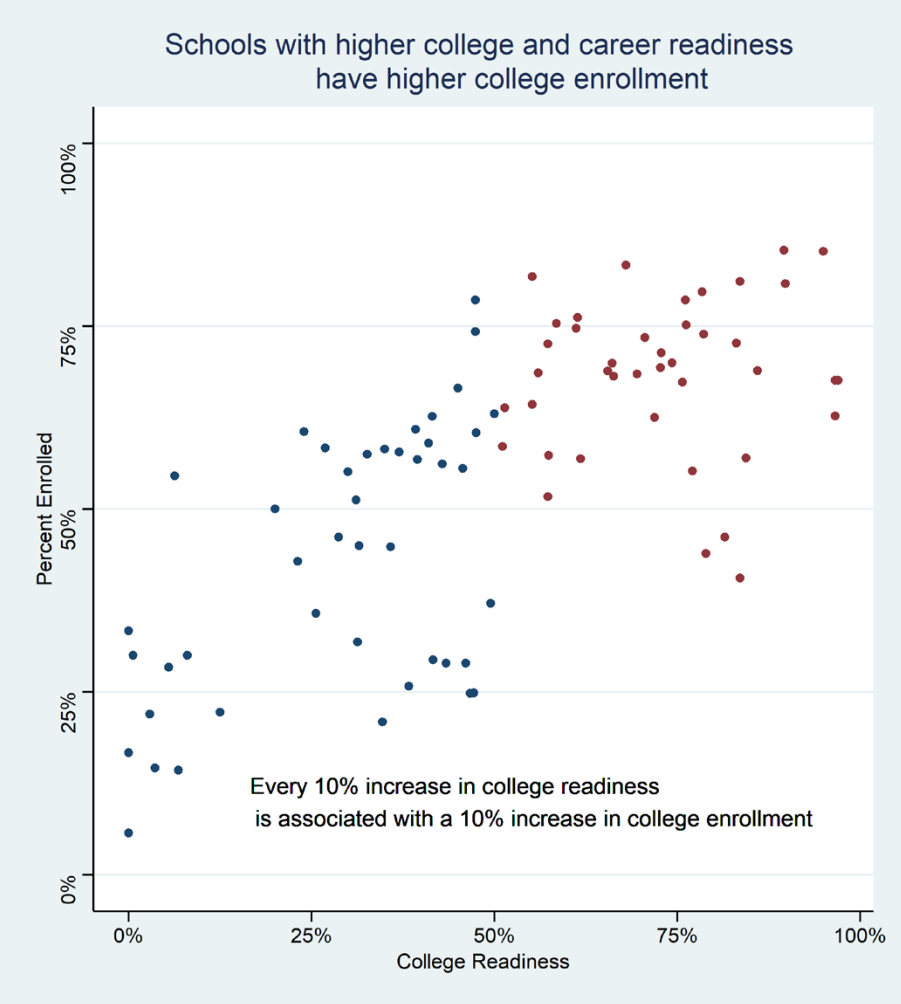


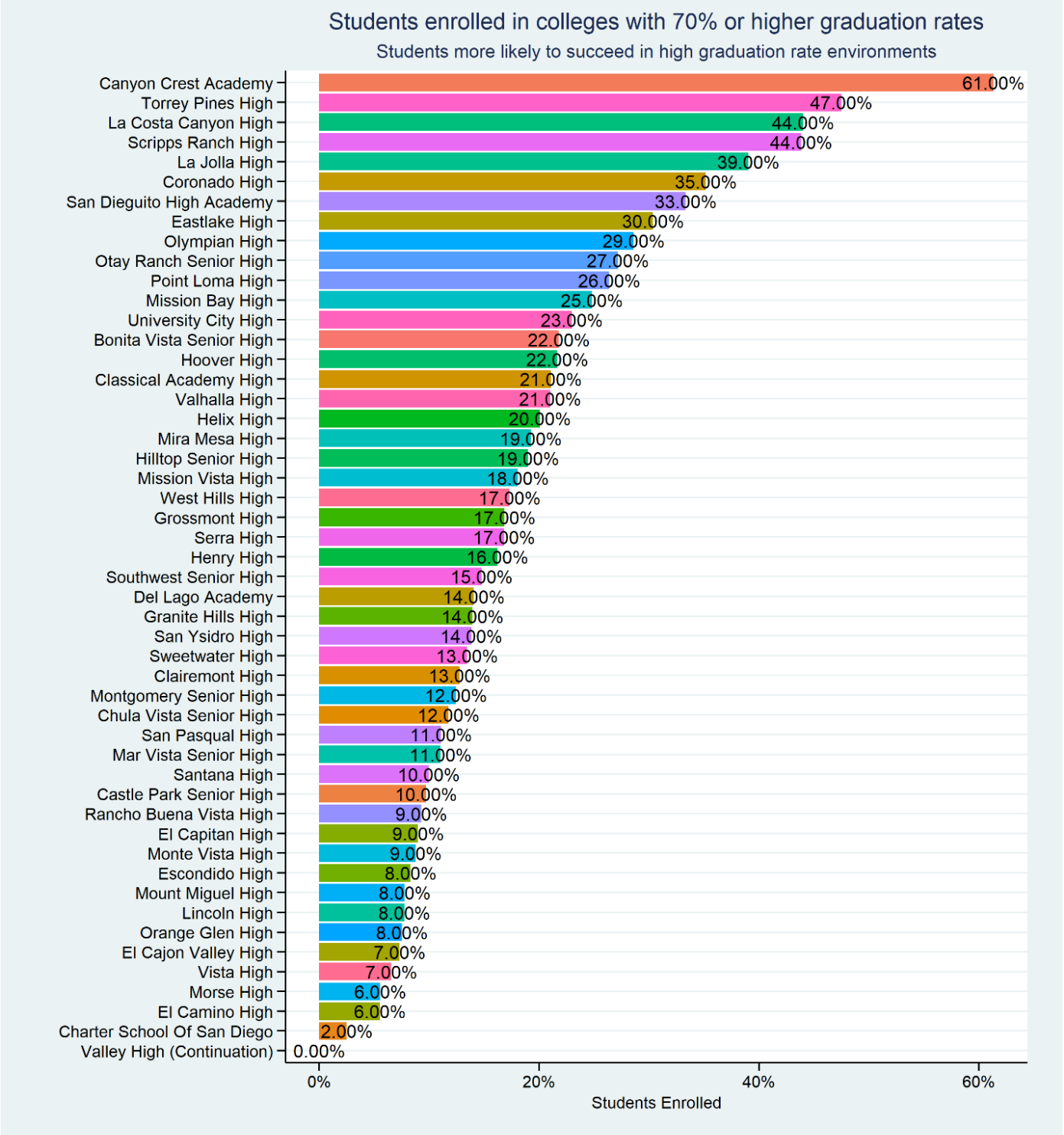
Figure 5 shows the relationship between college readiness and college enrollment. Each dot on the graph represents a San Diego County high school along with the rates of college readiness along the x-axis and college enrollment along the y-axis. As college and career readiness rates increase, students enroll in college at higher rates. For example, a high school where 50% of its graduates are prepared according to the CCI would expect about 50% of its graduates to enroll in college. While some variability exists in this estimate, the relationship between readiness and enrollment is strong.

Student Enrollment at Colleges with High Graduation Rates

Many recent college access programs focus on counseling students to enroll at colleges and universities where the program believes students have the greatest chance of graduating without incurring substantial debt (Castleman & Goodman, 2018). Results from these programs show clear evidence that students who receive counseling about college choices enroll in four-year colleges that are substantially less costly and with better characteristics, including graduation rates, compared to students without counseling. This evidence generalizes to lower-income students and has shown to increase bachelor's degree completion rates compared to similar students enrolled in community colleges (Goodman, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2017).

Based on this idea, we examined the percentage of students enrolled in colleges with a 70% or higher graduation rate. As depicted in Figure 6, many San Diego County high school graduates might benefit from counseling about college characteristics.

FIGURE 6. The Percentage of San Diego High School Graduates Enrolled in Colleges with a 70% or Higher Graduation Rate (with 100 students enrolled)



As depicted in Figure 6, many students from our most affluent areas are attending colleges with the highest degree completion rates. Research suggest that students who are low-income benefit from counseling and other interventions that get students to apply and enroll in colleges and universities with better completion rates.

Institutional Retention

Of the 20,610 students enrolled in college from the class of 2019, approximately 14,091 returned to the same college the following year. College retention is an important factor in college completion. Students who change colleges or stopout (i.e., leave with the intention of returning) of college are far less likely to complete a degree.

Retention Rates Across Top Attended Universities

FIGURE 7. Retention Rates for Top Four-Year Institutions Attended by San Diego County High School Graduates

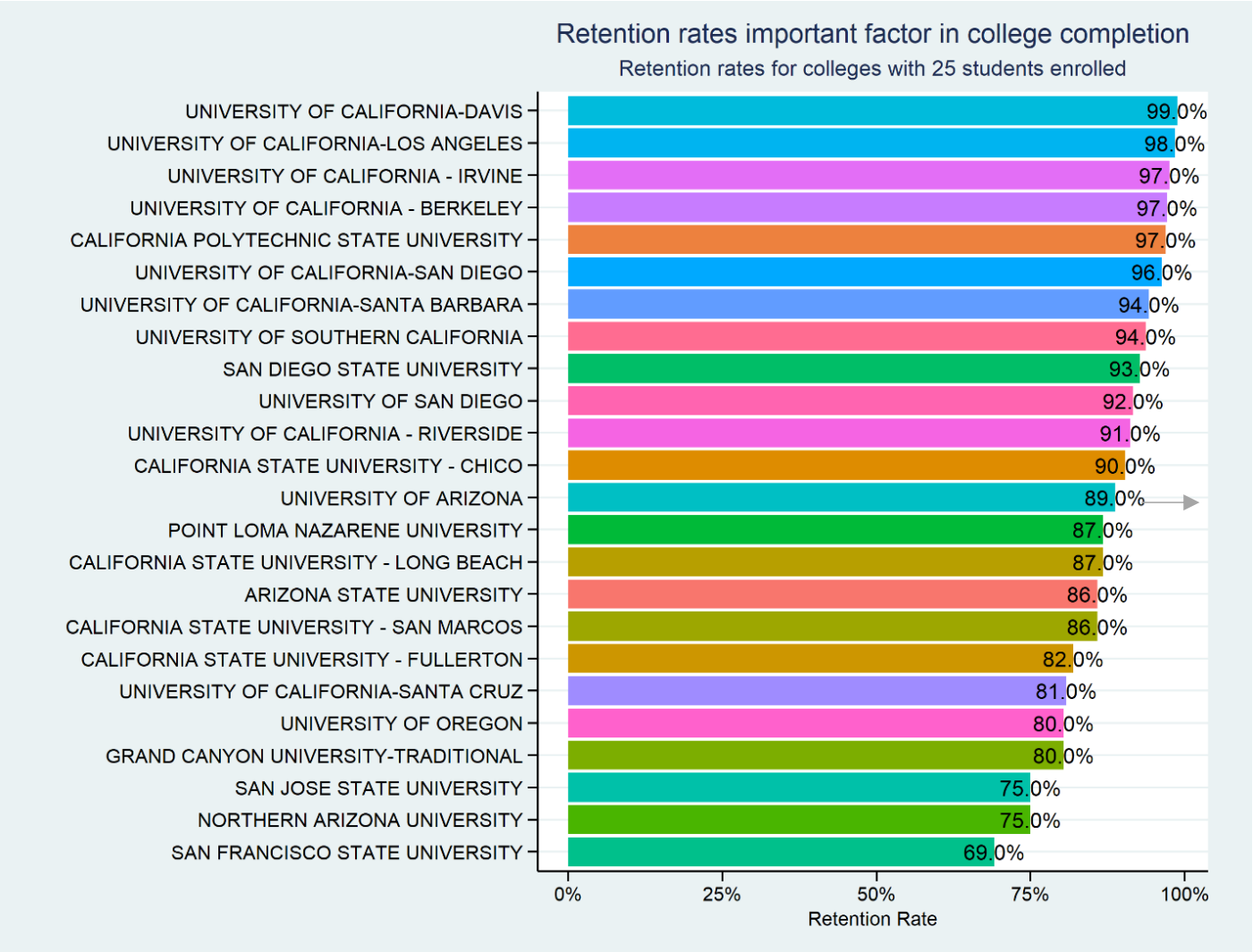


Figure 7 depicts college retention rates at the most highly attended four-year colleges and universities by San Diego County high school graduates. The University of California system has the highest retention rates compared to most colleges; however, the California State University system and other private universities rival these flagship universities in terms of retention rate. These institutions tend to provide more consistently high-quality student experiences, create a sense of school belonging, and have faculty who are engaged in the retention process (Caison, 2005).

Student retention is a good measure of how well a college matches a student's aspirations and qualifications. When students attend the "right" colleges, they are far less likely to change colleges or dropout. Counselors can help students make the best choices by informing them about and advising them toward colleges and universities with higher retention rates.

Demographics for students enrolled in two-year colleges differ substantially from four-year colleges. For example, two-year colleges enroll more part-time students who are less likely to remain in college. Two-year colleges also enroll more underprepared students based on the CCI. Unprepared students must take remedial or non-transfer level courses, which can increase the enrollment time in college, and subsequently, affect retention and completion.

FIGURE 8. Retention Rates for Top Two-Year Institutions Attended by San Diego County High School Graduates

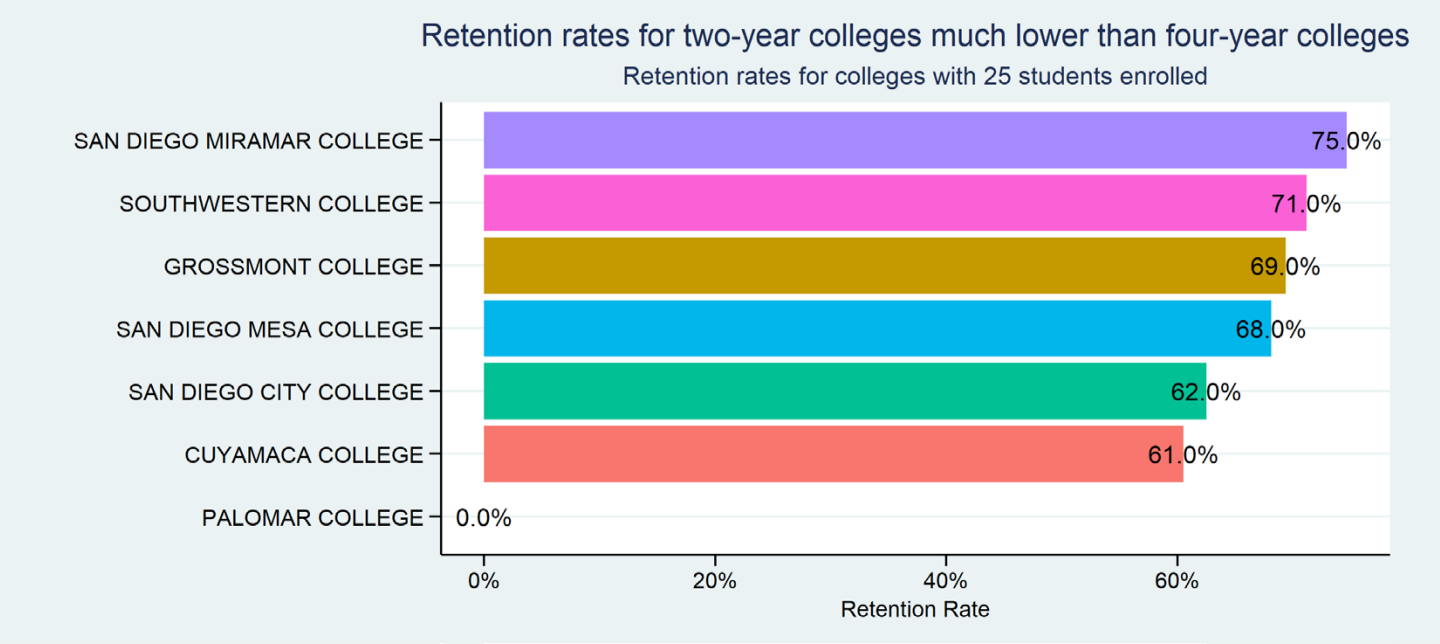


Figure 8 shows the retention rates of local two-year colleges. The average retention rates for two-year colleges is approximately 68%, considerably lower than a four-year college. Retention rates are often higher for any student enrolled full time, students who have a broad array of financial aid opportunities, and for students who enroll in student support services (Wessell, Bell, McPherson, Costello, & Jones, 2006).

Please note: We were unable to calculate Palomar College's retention data for the class of 2019 due to a glitch in the NSC's reporting deadline.

Retention Rates by Enrollment Status

On average, about 3,000 San Diego County high school graduates leave college annually. Approximately 10% of students who leave for a semester return. Students leave college for various reasons including failing to pass developmental courses, medical, and financial reasons.

While the vast majority of San Diego County high school graduates enroll in college full time, enrolling in college part time is an important predictor of whether students remain in college.

San Diego students mostly enroll full-time, but of the students who enroll part time, colleges retain these students at a far lower rate. For example, of the nearly 6% of students enrolled part time, about 4% were not retained by the college where they initially enrolled. That is to say, colleges fail to retain a higher percentage of part time students compared to full-time students. Of course, not every student has a work schedule or career aspirations that support attending college full time. Counselors and advisors must keep students informed as they make decisions that negatively influence retention and completion rates, such as attending college less than full time. Furthermore, full-time students are about twice as likely to earn a bachelor's degree in six years compared to students attending college less than full time (Statistics National Center for Education, 2020).

Variability in Stopout Rates

"Stopout" is an asset-based term used to describe a student who decides college is not working out for them at a certain period in their life and plans to return when it is more convenient. Semantically, stopping out sounds better than dropping out, but stopping out increases a student's time to attain a degree, which can escalate the costs of college and result in a higher attrition rate for the university.

Furthermore, stopping out does not affect all students proportionally. For example, more than half of part-time students stop out compared to less than 40% of full-time students. Male students stop out at higher rates than females. White, Black and American Indian students are the most likely candidates to stopout (Park, 2005).

FIGURE 9. San Diego County High School Graduates Stopouts by Higher Education Institution

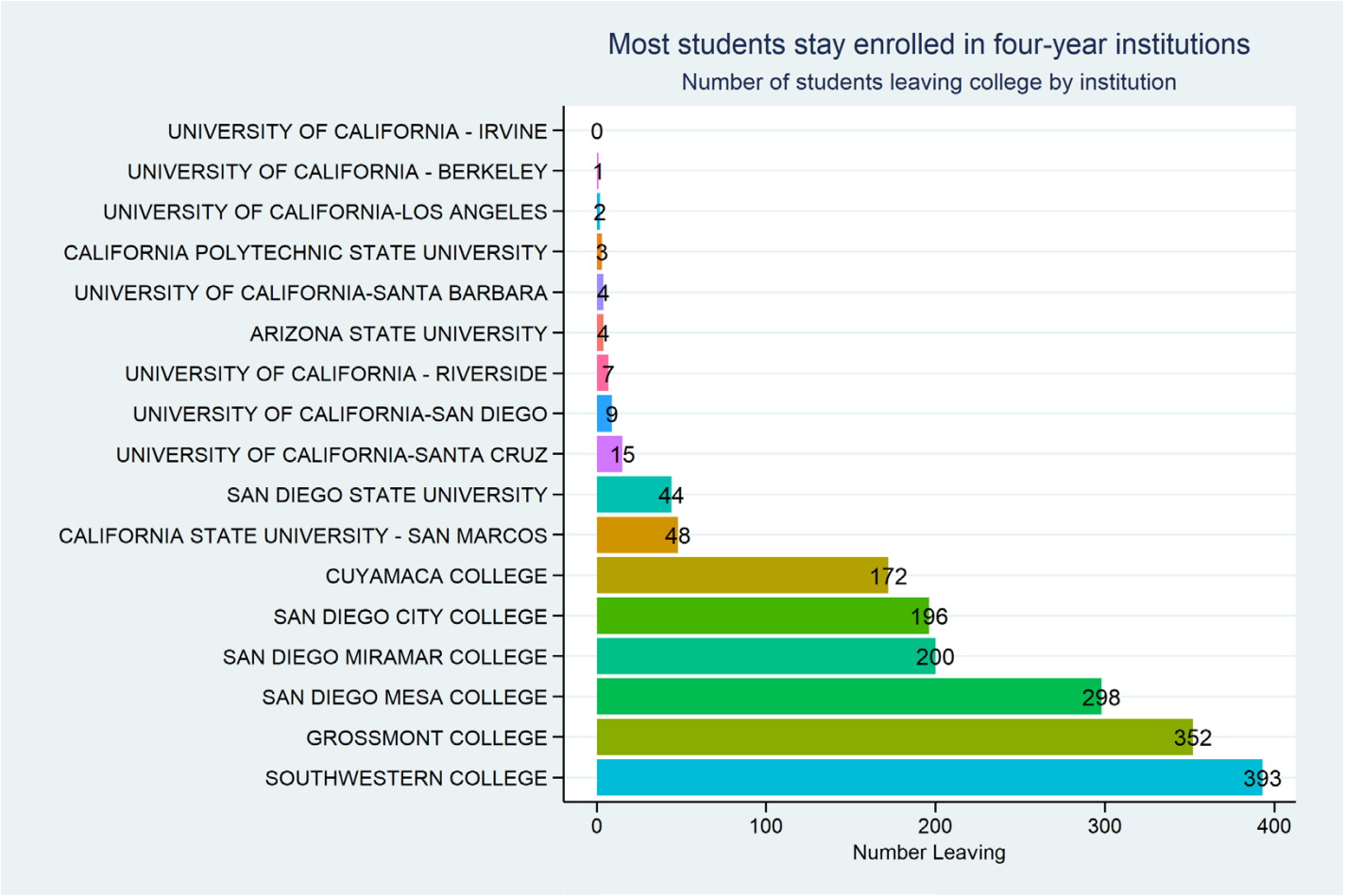


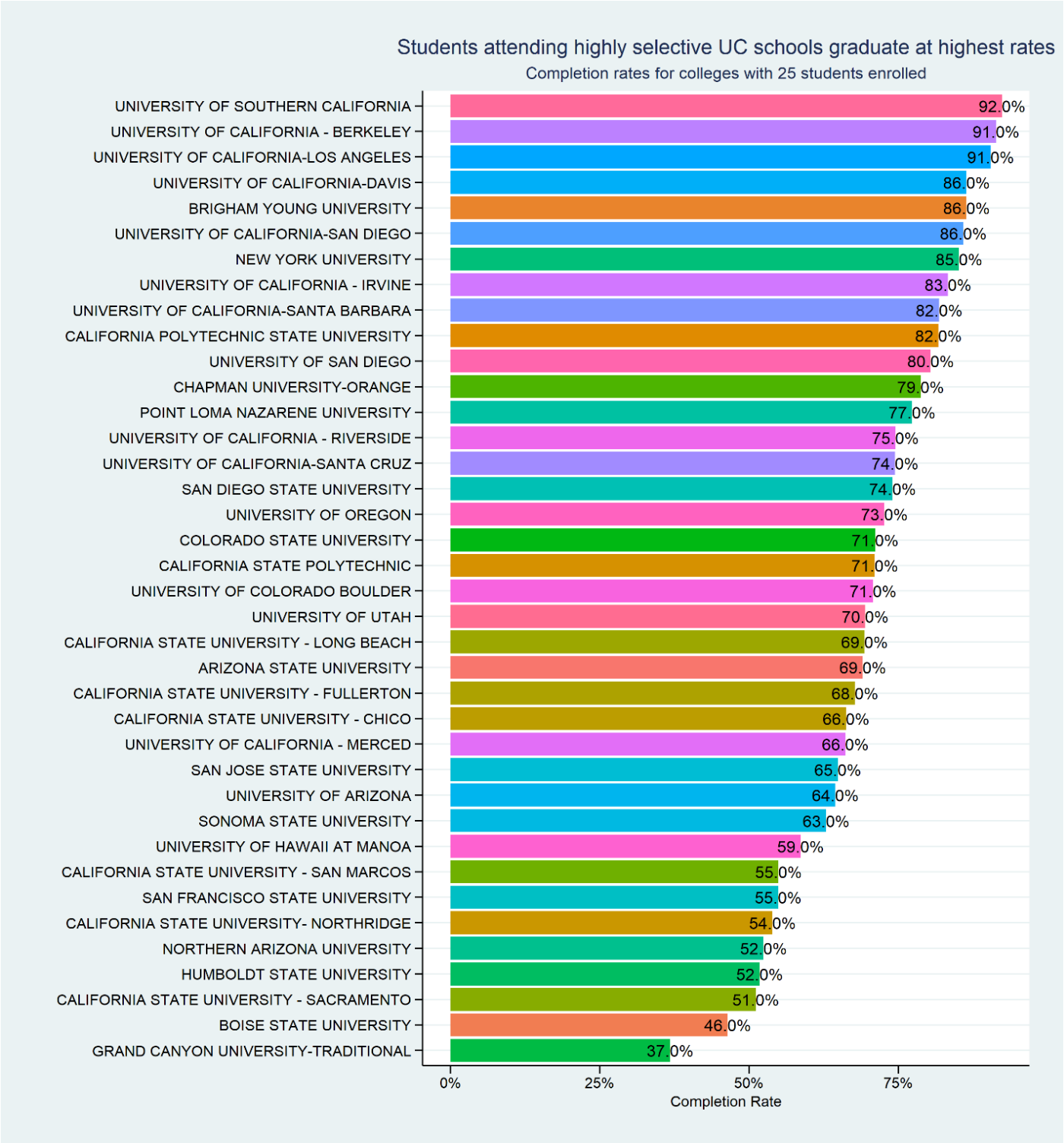
Figure 9 shows the number of stopouts at the top attended universities by San Diego County high school graduates. This figure depicts data complimentary to each college's retention rates. Each of these stopouts represents a student poorly matched with a college where they had the best chance of succeeding. Stopouts are essentially "errors in the process" and with greater intentional effort to matching students to the right colleges, fewer students will leave college and consequently more will attain a degree.

Institutional Completion

Completing college has benefits far beyond high school and college by affecting the economic and social factors that influence a person's quality of life. The college completion rates for students who graduated high school in 2014 from two- and four-year institutions was 39% in 2020 up from 37% in 2018.

Variability in College Completion Rates

FIGURE 10. Completion Rates for Four-Year Institutions



Few students use graduation rates as a primary factor in their decision to attend college. However, graduation rates are the best predictors of attaining a college degree. Figure 9 depicts six-year completion rates at the most frequently attended higher education institutions by San Diego County high school graduates. Students have the highest chance of completing a degree when they enroll in colleges with the highest graduation rates. Of course, many of the colleges with the highest graduation rates are the most selective institutions, which makes them challenging to gain admittance. However, this list comprises a variety of college and universities that have relatively high graduation rates and are more favorable in terms of acceptance rates. Students who use graduation rates as part of their decision to enroll in college are far more likely to stay enrolled in college and attain a degree.

FIGURE 11. College Completion Rates for Local Two-Year Colleges

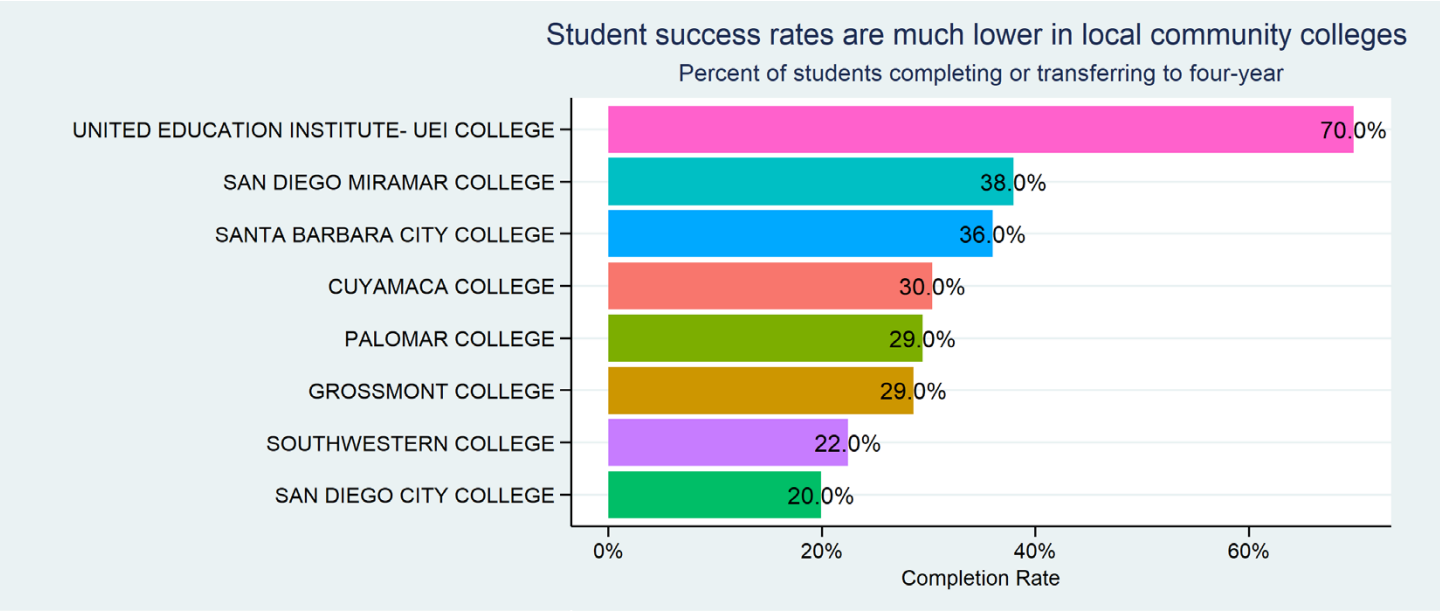


Figure 11 illustrates the success rates in two-year institutions. Compared to Figure 10 students complete degrees or transfer to f our-year institutions (i.e., our definition of success at a two-year institution) at much lower rates than students enrolled in more selective, four-year institutions. Not every student has the ambition to attend a four-year institution; however, counselors and advisors must ensure that students enroll in colleges that match their aspirations and preferences. Enrolling in college is not a substitute for earning a college degree.

Section III: Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary goals of the *San Diego County Choosing the Right College* report are to inform leaders of school districts and educational agencies about college-going outcomes in San Diego County and to identify potential areas for action to increase students' preparedness for college and likelihood of attaining a degree.

The report examined San Diego County evidence regarding college readiness, enrollment, persistence, and completion in an effort to build a picture of our current reality and the needs we must address.

We have several reasons to celebrate this year. First, we experienced the highest rate of students attaining a college degree in 2020. Nearly four in 10 San Diego County high school graduates from the class of 2014 earned a college degree in 2020, an increase of 2% from the year before. Secondly, a relatively high percentage of students graduated college-and career-ready despite the pandemic. Over 50% of San Diego County high school class of 2020 graduated high school prepared for college and career.

In addition to these strengths, we have some notable areas for improvement. As the key findings and subsequent analyses suggest:

1. College and career readiness rates vary considerably across the county. While more students graduate college- and career-ready, many students continue to lack access to a rigorous curriculum, which is highly predictive of succeeding in college. ***Increasing college and career readiness by 10% will likely result in a similar increase in college enrollment.***
2. The pandemic hindered college enrollment in 2020. College enrollment in San Diego County declined more than 10% from 2019. ***It's important to monitor college access to determine how many students who deferred enrollment in 2020 enroll in 2021. We must also pay close attention to how the pandemic influenced enrollment rates for American Indian students, and students who are low-income, English learners, and others.***
3. Less than 20% of students on average attend colleges with a 70% graduation rate or higher and about an equal share of students attend two-year and four-year colleges where success rates vary. It's a critical priority that students are supported ***to attend colleges that ensure most students attain a degree***. Every student needs access to the most relevant information when making a decision about where to attend college, especially an institution's graduation rate.
4. A poor college match results in lower persistence rates for students and retention rates at colleges and universities. Notably, students enrolled less than full time are retained at a rate seven times lower than students enrolled full time. ***All students should be guaranteed the resources to navigate the college enrollment process including tools and information that support college matching, including net cost and graduation rates.*** Every high school student needs access to the resources necessary to get to and through college.

Choosing the right college is one of the most important decisions students make on their college journey. Students matched to the right college are far more likely to attain a college degree. Addressing these recommendations, therefore, are critical for supporting students to follow through with their intentions to attend college in addition to boosting college completion rates.

Limitations

College-going data are limited to schools that participate in the NSC and to students who exit high school by graduation. For example, the dataset available for the Class of 2012 in the Clearinghouse includes 28,124 county students. San Diego County had roughly 42,886 students enrolled in the 12th grade in 2012. Only 34,214 students graduated on time, therefore 8,642 students were not in the data set because they exited high school for reasons other than graduation. Secondly, not all schools upload data to the Clearinghouse. Out of the 175 local high schools, approximately 119 use the Clearinghouse, reducing the overall n size of this report by another 6,090 students—arriving at the 28,124 students in the 2012 dataset. Therefore, all college-going data for each year from 2011-20 are limited to (a) only students who exited high school as graduates and to (b) the schools that participated in the NSC.

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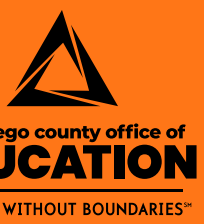

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