

College Going in San Diego

An Analysis of College Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion Patterns

Summer Update



College Going Rates Stabilize in San Diego County

Higher education enrollment leveled off in San Diego in 2023. After experiencing four straight years where more students opted out of college, fewer students opted out in 2022 compared to 2021. In 2021, 10,973 students or 36% of the graduating class opted out of college compared to 9,899 (34%) in the class of 2022. Fewer students opting out of college is good news in San Diego given the impact the pandemic has had on college going.

Despite this promising data, more needs to do more to ensure students enroll and complete degrees, especially students experiencing financial hardship. College has both incredible financial costs and benefits. Students looking to increase their socio-economic status might not pursue college because of its initial cost, but this decision has financial ramifications for those students later in life. There is no doubt that many students need a college degree to attain their professional aspirations and to achieve upward economic mobility. Simply put, students who complete a four-year degree have a better chance of becoming socially mobile than students who do not complete a four-year degree.

Moreover, completing a college degree is not a simple task, especially for historically marginalized students. Currently, 32% of San Diego County students attain a college degree in six years, 6% higher than the national average. We must continue to build off our enrollment data by acting in two ways. First, in the short-term, we must improve our understanding of college-going data through SDCOE's partnership with high school districts and the National Student Clearinghouse. That information will help educators address students' fears and hesitations about attaining a college degree and, through this understanding, increase effective strategies and continue to boost college access. Second, we must implement long-term solutions, such as improving college and career readiness in the K-12 system and supporting lower income and historically marginalized students to complete college degrees.

The annual report of the National Clearinghouse data is designed to increase our understanding of and decisions about college access and completion. The National Student Clearinghouse's StudentTracker service is a nationwide source of college enrollment and degree data from over 3,600 colleges and universities. The StudentTracker data provides our community with a reasonably accurate representation of the number and percentage of students who enroll, persist, and complete college annually. The SDCOE partnership with local high school districts to capture college-going data guides our efforts to support more students in attending and completing a four-year degree so they – and San Diego County – can thrive.

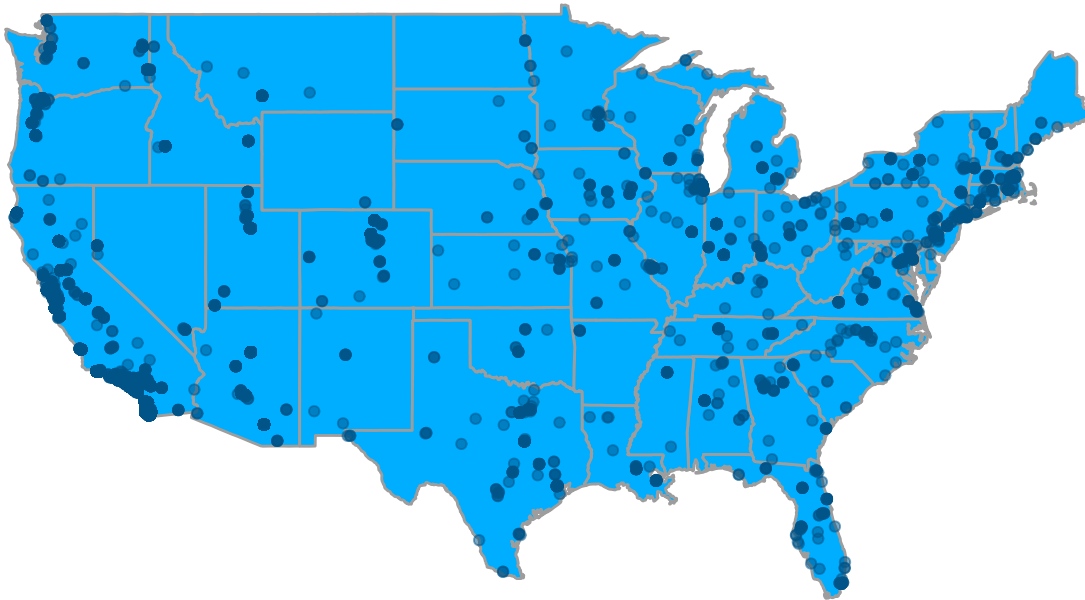
College Enrollment

In 2022, the National Student Clearinghouse reported 19,476 San Diego County students enrolled in college right out of high school. College enrollment patterns in the Clearinghouse may vary from year to year for a variety of reasons including an overall decline in college going, fluctuations in the size of 12th grade cohorts, and the timing of when local high schools submit their graduates to the Clearinghouse.

The map below locates the nearly 1,900 colleges and universities where students enrolled in 2022. Most students (83%) attended colleges and universities in Southern California, while the remaining 2,200 attended institutions in all other 49 states.

FIGURE 1

While Many College Students Stay Close to Home, Graduates Enroll in Colleges and Universities Across the Country



SD COE

Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

Note: We used geospatial data to identify the location of each college or university where graduates from the San Diego County Class of 2022 enrolled. We mapped each student to their respective college or university, darker dot patterns represent areas where more students attend college.

Top 10 Colleges and Universities Attended

Nearly as many students enrolled in four-year institutions (9,026) as two-year colleges (9,471). Community college enrollment remained steady in 2022, while four-year college enrollment declined slightly. Four-year college enrollment dipped to its lowest levels in 8 years. Variations in enrollment patterns for San Diego graduates differ by institution, with some institutions, such as San Diego State University, increasing enrollment, while others, such as the University of California, San Diego, declining in enrollment. These variations in enrollment patterns have the greatest impact on lower-income students whose enrollment declines were double other student groups, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

TABLE 1

More High School Graduates Opted for a Four-Year College Experience in 2022

Community colleges still have a big enrollment footprint in San Diego

	Level	Number Attending
College Name		
San Diego State University	4-year	1791
University of California-San Diego	4-year	899
California State University-San Marcos	4-year	1135
University of California-Los Angeles	4-year	286
Southwestern College	2-year	2077
Palomar College	2-year	1457
San Diego Mesa College	2-year	1135
Grossmont College	2-year	1044
San Diego Miramar College	2-year	906
San Diego City College	2-year	690

Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

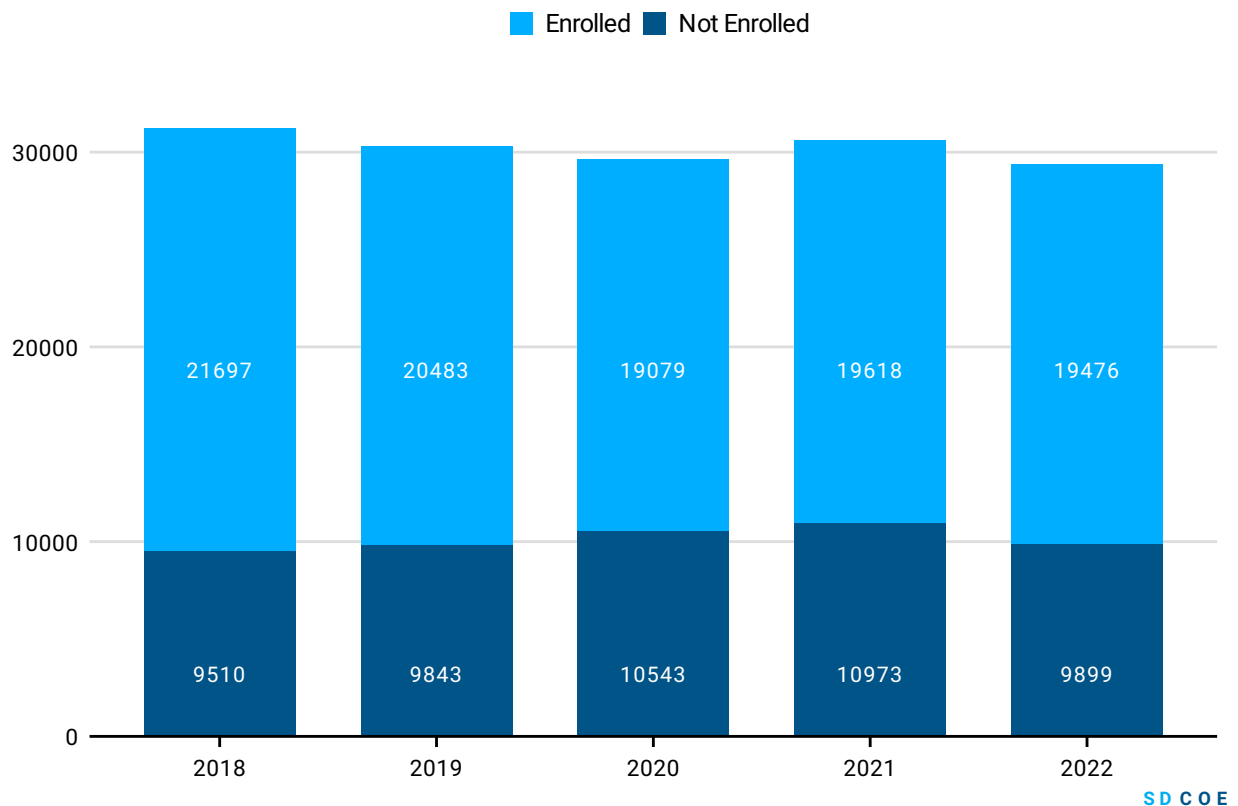
College Enrollment by Cohort

The overall number of students enrolled in college stabilized in 2022. The number of students enrolling in college in 2022 was 19,476 compared to 20,483 four years ago and compared to the low of 19,079 during the pandemic. Additionally, the number of students opting out of college (dark blue) trended slightly higher for the past three years leveling off in 2022, while the number enrolled (light blue) had the biggest decline in 2020, rebounding and remaining stable for the past two years. About 34% of the graduating class in 2022 opted out of college compared to a high of 36% in 2020 and a low of 30% in 2018.

FIGURE 2

Early Enrollment Figures Shows College-Going Declines Tapering

Number enrolled



Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

Note: We calculated enrollment number for each graduating cohort using data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse data file supplies information on whether a student enrolled in college or not with a 93 percent matching rate.

Persistence and Retention

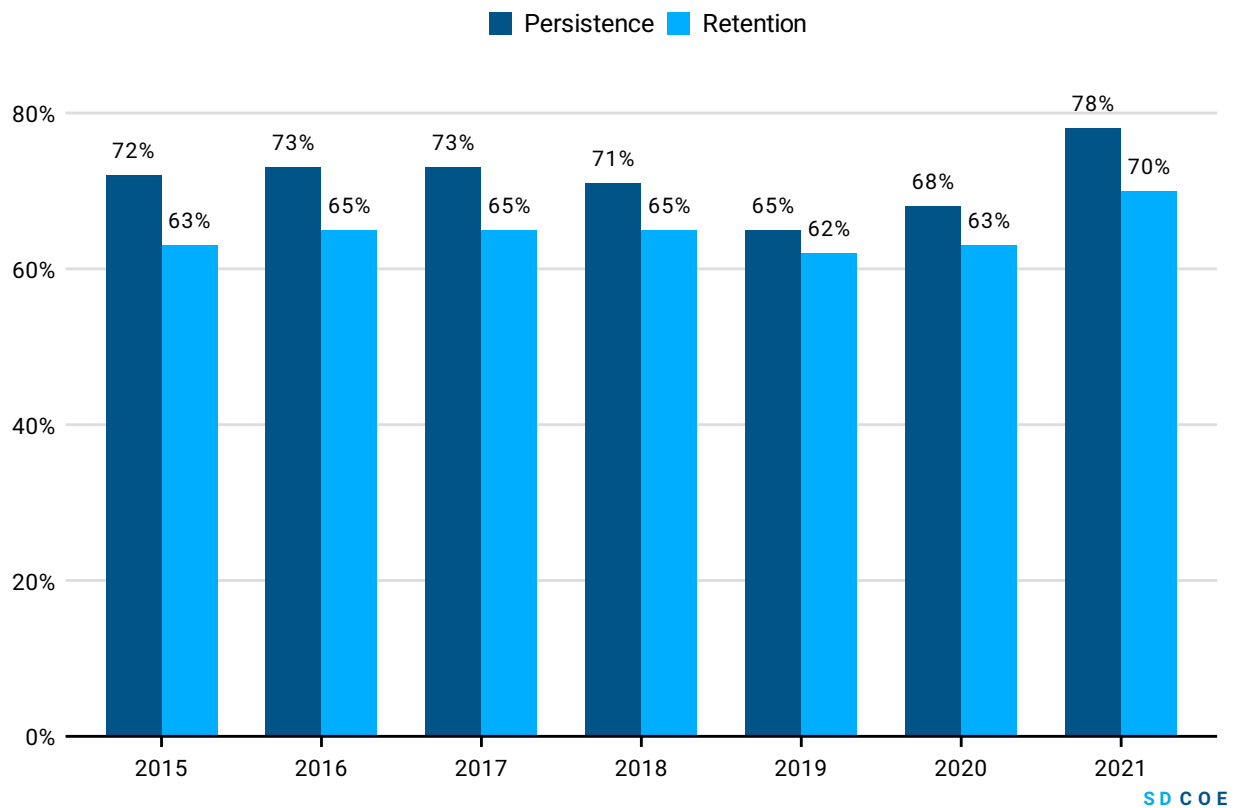
Students who enroll in college tend to stay in college. Some stay at their original institution (retention) while others opt to attend college elsewhere (persistence). Both persistence and retention rates rose to their highest levels in 2022. About 8 in 10 enrolled students remained enrolled from year to year.

FIGURE 3

Differences in College Persistence and Retention Hold Steady

The number of students that remain in college compared to those staying in the same college

Percent persisting and retained



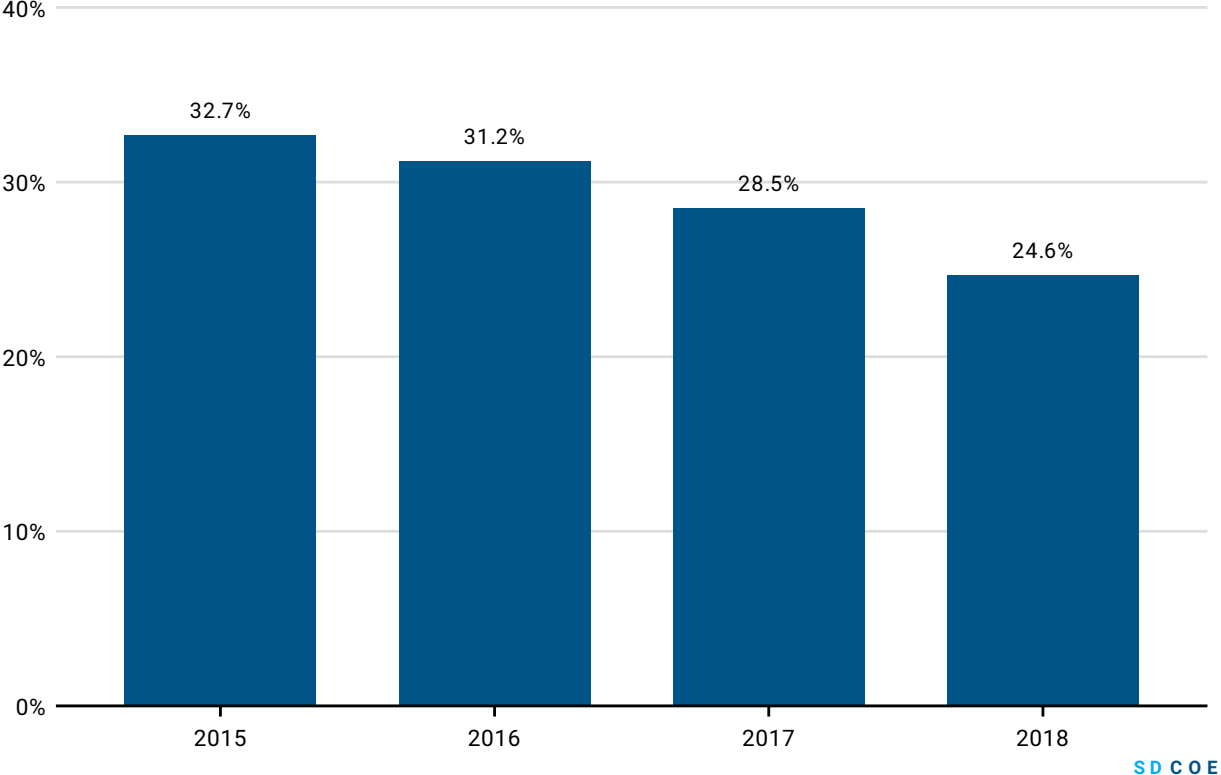
Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

Note: We calculated persistence as the percentage of students enrolled in college in the first year after high school graduation who then returned to any college for a second year. We calculated retention as the percentage of students returning to the same college from the previous year.

Completion

Historically only a small number of students actually earn college degrees. About 25% of the Class of 2018 has earned a college degree, while 33% of the Class of 2016 has earned a degree. To improve economic mobility, supporting students to access college is not enough. We need to get students to finish. Furthermore, we might have significantly fewer students earning degrees in the future based on our current enrollment levels.

FIGURE 4
More than 3 in 10 San Diego Students Earn a College Degree in 6 Years
The percentage of students completing degrees in four and six years remains low



Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

Note: Colleges report graduation rates many different ways. We calculated graduation rates by cohort or year of high school graduation. The six-year graduation rate reflected on the graph represents the percentage of students from the Class of 2016 who earned a degree. The four-year rate represents only the students from the class of 2018 who have earned a degree.

Degrees Earned

For students who persisted and earned a degree, Business Administration topped the list as the most popular college major followed by Psychology and Computer Science. Because earnings vary based on the type of degree students get, several organizations including [College Scorecard](#) and [Salary Surfer](#) provide valuable information linking college degrees to the median salaries of graduates. Students may be surprised to learn that some associate's degrees may result in higher earning potential than some bachelor's degrees, which could reduce worries or hesitation about enrolling in a two- or four-year schools.

TABLE 2

2015 Graduates Earned Nearly 8,000 Degrees

Many students earn two-year degrees in same time some students earn four-year degrees

	# Obtained	Time to Completion
Degree		
Certificate	453	4 years, 1 month
Associate's	517	4 years 1 month
Bachelor's	3305	4 years 6 months
Master's and beyond (with Bachelor's)	468	6 years 1 month
Unreported	3695	4 years 6 months
Majors		
Business Administration	851	
Psychology	601	
Computer Science	534	
Sociology	307	
Political Science	294	
Economics	264	
Communication	255	
Mechanical Engineering	222	
Biology	220	

Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report

Note: We calculated degree information and time to degree from the National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker report using the Class of 2015. Many colleges and universities choose not to report degree titles or degree majors opting instead to report a graduation date only. For those students, we have identified their degree as "unreported."

Final Thoughts

This year, 40,137 students will graduate from one of San Diego's 175 high schools. Of these students, roughly 8,534 will graduate from college four years from now. When those seniors entered high school as freshmen four years ago, many of them dreamed of a future that included college. Many dreamed of careers that a college degree would facilitate. Many dreamed of the upward mobility that public education promises students. The downward trend in higher education enrollment in San Diego is not a forgone conclusion.

Improving college-going rates must be a systematic and intentional process in schools. The best chance we have of ending this enrollment crisis is to build stronger relationships with students and to provide them with information about their college-going options that keeps them progressing. Additionally, we need to better understand the social and emotional stressors students experience in the process and work to mitigate these challenges. Going to college is not something we can leave to chance.

Everyone reading this report is an important decision-maker in their organization—many are directly responsible for college access. I urge you to stay informed about shifts in college enrollment patterns and invest in strategies that address students' fears and hesitations about enrolling in college. This group of high school graduates may be the most resilient of any other cohort before them. We must honor their experiences because they have truly paid a much greater price to achieve their aspirations than any of us ever have or possibly will.

Interested in boosting four-year college enrollment rates?

Check out these resources:

- [Is a four-year college right for me?](#)
- [Make it Easier](#)
- [College Enrollment Checklists](#)

This report was developed by SDCOE's Assessment, Accountability, and Evaluation Department. Further information on SDCOE's mission is available at sdcoe.net/mission.

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