

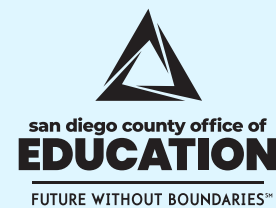


Choosing the *Right* College

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION SERVICES



san diego county office of
EDUCATION
FUTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES™



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Introduction

Regrettably, a significant portion of first-year college freshmen in San Diego County do not continue into their second year at the same institution, with about 4,500 out of 20,000 students either transferring or dropping out. To visualize, in a group of 20 college-bound students, five will not return to the same institution for their second year. Over a span of six years, only seven of these 20 students will complete a degree.

While college serves as a period for exploration, and students might find the need to change institutions if their initial choice does not meet their needs, it is crucial to acknowledge the real impacts of such decisions. These include extended time and increased costs to complete a degree, and a decreased likelihood of degree completion, particularly among economically disadvantaged students (Brey et al., 2019; O’Keeffe, 2013).

Many factors contribute to college attrition, such as academic challenges, financial issues, and personal circumstances. However, a prevalent issue is the mismatch between a student and their chosen institution (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Often, students lack essential information about the academic, financial, and social environments of colleges before enrolling. For instance, Javier transferred to CSU Long Beach after finding UC Davis lacked diversity and social connectivity. Similarly, Amani left Palomar College, seeking a more inclusive environment than what was available at the nearby community college known for its high transfer rates and part-time student population. Such shifts between schools can hinder timely degree completion or even prevent it altogether.

Annually, San Diego County sees 4,500 students vanish from its college retention pipeline. As a community, more can be done to match students to institutions that will increase their likelihood of completing a degree. This report, aimed at school and district leaders focuses on college and career readiness, and provides comprehensive countywide data on college enrollment, persistence, and completion. We examine these metrics across the county and outline actions to help schools support students to find their best-fit colleges.

The report is structured in six sections: The first section examines trends in the labor market with an emphasis on degree attainment. The second section examines patterns in college-going among San Diego graduates, and section three summarizes trends on degree completion. The fourth section presents additional information about degree completion and wages. The fifth section synthesizes key findings across the first four sections, and the final section poses questions and actions that address the challenges identified in other sections.

Given the growing demand for college-educated workers, it is vital for regions to bridge the gap between the current supply of qualified young adults and projected workforce needs. Modernized longitudinal data systems enable education leaders to gain critical insights into how students navigate from K-12 education through higher education and into the workforce, and identify where students are most likely to falter. Education agencies can utilize tools such as The Strategic Data Project (SDP)’s Education to Workforce Pathways Diagnostic Toolkit to understand these patterns. This toolkit provides a set of diagnostic research questions and resources that organizations can leverage as an initial step in comprehending trends in workforce and educational attainment.

Below we highlight some key questions K-12 systems should answer about workforce outcomes. Next, we investigate these questions, visualizing them with data from San Diego County, then present actions and strategies for addressing the findings.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE BE ASKING ABOUT OUR WORKFORCE NEEDS?

1. Is San Diego County on track to meet its education attainment goals?
2. Who needs support enrolling in college?
3. Who needs additional support making it through college?
4. Who earns a living wage?

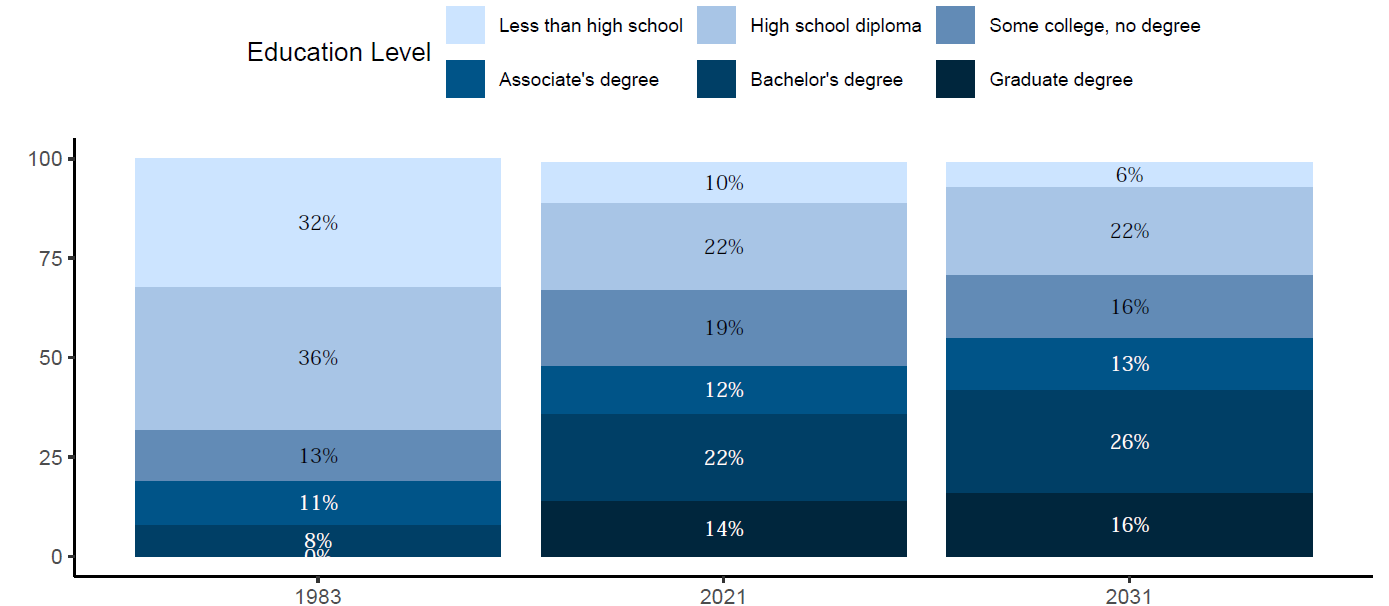
PART I: Our Educated Workforce Needs

“By 2031, 72 percent of jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary education.”
— *The Future of Good Jobs*

EVOLVING JOB REQUIREMENTS AND EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Over the last four decades, the landscape of job requirements and educational levels has undergone a significant transformation, highlighting an ongoing trend toward increased educational demands. The graph below illustrates how the distribution of job requirements from 1983 stands in stark contrast to those of today along with projections further into the future. The use of different colors in the chart to represent various levels of educational attainment vividly demonstrates the shifting demands of the workforce, indicating that by 2031, nearly three-quarters of jobs will necessitate a college degree. This visualization, among others from *The Future of Good Jobs* (2024), serves as a critical tool for interpreting economic shifts, guiding educational policies, and preparing for future workforce needs. It emphasizes the growing importance of higher education in job acquisition and highlights the profound implications for individuals, educators, policymakers, and the broader economy.

EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS RISE AS JOBS SEEK MORE SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education; US Census Bureau; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Current Population Survey SDCOE

The majority of jobs required a high school diploma or less in 1983 (68% combined for “Less than high school” and “High school diploma”), and only a small fraction of jobs required a bachelor’s degree (8%) or higher. By 2021, a shift toward higher education is noticeable. Jobs requiring “Less than high school” education have significantly decreased to 10%. Jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree have risen to 22%, showing a growth in demand for higher educational qualifications. The segment for “Some college, no degree” has also seen a notable increase, suggesting that even some college education is becoming more valued over having just a

high school diploma. Projecting to 2031, the trend toward higher educational requirements continues. Jobs requiring a bachelor's degree are projected to increase further to 26%, and the proportion of jobs requiring "Less than high school" drops to a mere 6%. Graduate degree requirements are also expected to rise, accounting for 16% of jobs, reflecting the increasing complexity and specialization of roles in the job market.

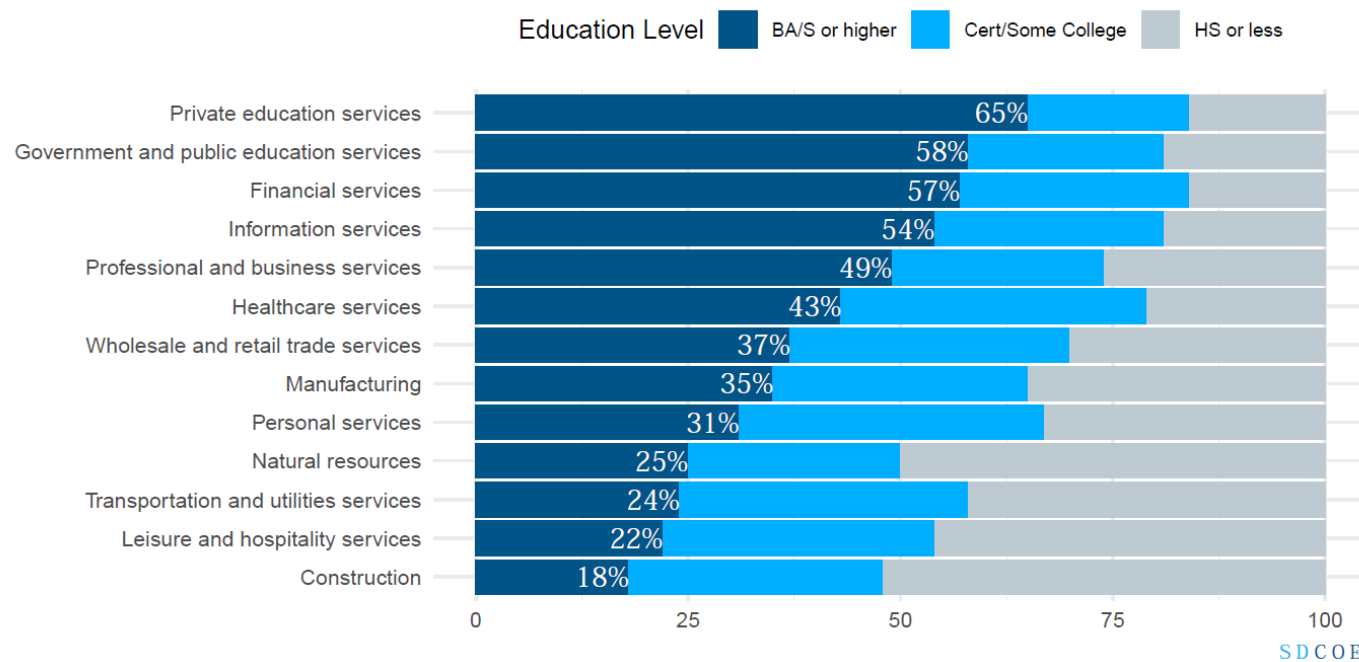
As we move into 2030, there is a clear trend toward jobs requiring higher levels of education. This may be due to technological advancements, the complexity of modern economies, and the outsourcing or automation of lower-skilled jobs. Regardless, this shift implies that higher education will be increasingly important for job security and career advancement. Such a shift also raises questions about access to education and the potential widening of economic disparities based on educational attainment. This data suggests a need for policies that support education accessibility and affordability, workforce development programs, and perhaps retraining initiatives for those whose jobs are affected by these shifts. Overall, these data highlight the evolving landscape of job requirements, emphasizing the growing importance of higher education in securing employment in the modern economy.

EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS BY INDUSTRY

Educational requirements differ markedly across industry sectors, as illustrated in the chart below. Industries such as construction, leisure and hospitality services, transportation, utilities services, and private education services showcase a diverse range of degree and credential needs. This diversity is visually represented through segmented bars, each differentiated by education level.

Each bar spans from 0 to 100, demonstrating the proportion of the workforce within each sector that falls into one of the three categorized education levels. This graphical representation effectively highlights how educational demands can vary significantly from one industry to another, reflecting the unique skills and qualifications each sector values.

DEMAND FOR FORMAL DEGREES IS ON THE RISE IN SOME SECTORS, OTHER INDUSTRIES REFLECT A SHIFT TOWARD PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE AND SKILL-BASED TRAINING



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education; US Census Bureau; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Current Population Survey; Am Community Survey

Industries like "Construction" and "Leisure and hospitality services" have a high proportion of jobs that require only high school education or less. This trend indicates that entry into these fields is more accessible to a broader range of the population, which can be crucial for providing employment opportunities to those without higher education. However, it also suggests potential vulnerabilities in these industries regarding wage growth and job security, which are often less favorable in jobs with lower educational requirements. Jobs such as "Financial services," "Information services," and "Professional and business services" have a significant percentage of jobs that require a bachelor's degree or higher. These industries often offer higher wages and more stability but require a substantial educational investment, which can be a barrier to entry for individuals without the resources to pursue higher education. For "Healthcare services," there's a notable balance between jobs requiring certifications/some college education and those requiring a bachelor's degree or higher, indicating diverse entry points in terms of education. This diversity in educational requirements provides multiple entry points for individuals at different stages of their educational and professional lives, making healthcare a versatile field in terms of career opportunities. It also reflects the varied nature of healthcare jobs, from technical and support roles to professional and specialist positions, each with different levels of responsibility and required expertise. Other types of employment, such as "Education," rely heavily on a college-educated population to draw their employee base. This dependency on higher education qualifications ensures that educators are well-prepared and knowledgeable but also highlights the sector's challenges in attracting and retaining talent, especially in communities where access to higher education is limited.

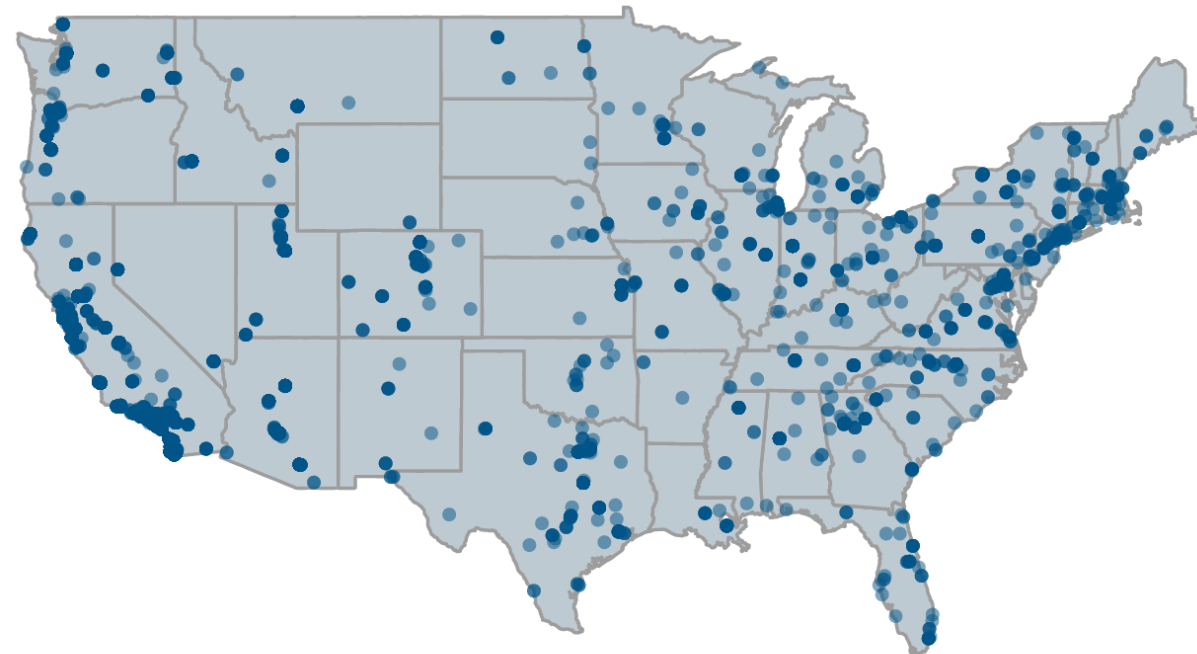
PART II: Patterns in College-Going

Understanding where high school graduates from San Diego County choose to enroll and their educational paths is vital for effective educational planning and resource distribution. Monitoring the number of graduates who advance to higher education and their chosen institutions offers essential insights for school counselors, district administrators, and policymakers. This data sheds light on trends such as favored colleges or programs, which in turn supports the enhancement of college preparatory pathways and the development of targeted outreach initiatives. Additionally, it plays a critical role in assessing the success of existing educational approaches and in making informed adjustments to better assist students as they transition from high school to college. Therefore, the collection and analysis of this data are key to improving educational outcomes and strengthening support frameworks for the students of San Diego County.

WHERE DO STUDENTS GO TO COLLEGE?

The map below shows the distribution of college and university enrollments across the United States, highlighting how students tend to enroll in institutions relatively close to home. Each dot on the map represents a location where students have enrolled in higher education institutions.

MANY STUDENTS OPT TO ATTEND NEARBY COLLEGES, A GROWING NUMBER VENTURE OUT TO INSTITUTIONS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES



SDCOE

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).
Note: Some college do not report enrollment data.

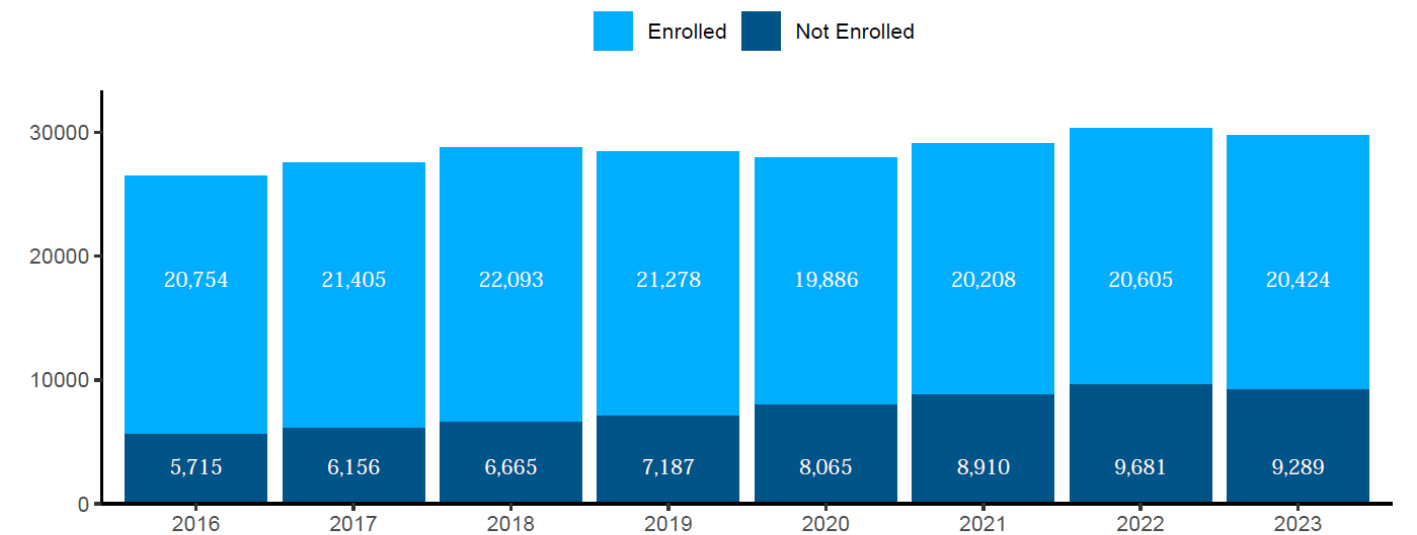
The concentration of dots is noticeably denser in areas that are typically more populated, such as the East Coast, West Coast, and certain parts of the Midwest. About 10,000 students attend colleges and universities in Southern California (70%), compared to the nearly 600 students enrolled on the East Coast. This map underscores the geographical patterns in postsecondary education choices among high school graduates, demonstrating that while most students stay close to home, there is also a significant number of students attending colleges and universities across various parts of the country. For more detailed information about college enrollment patterns, use our interactive [college access](#) app.

HOW MANY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ENROLL IN COLLEGE IMMEDIATELY?

For numerous career paths, immediate college enrollment after high school is essential. This concept, known as seamless enrollment, is represented by the percentage of high school graduates who start college in the fall directly following their graduation. The accompanying graph illustrates the trends in college enrollment from 2016 to 2023, detailing the yearly counts of students who enrolled and those who did not.

Each bar in the graph is divided into two segments: the darker blue segment indicates students who chose not to enroll in college (“Not Enrolled”), and the lighter blue segment represents those who enrolled (“Enrolled”). The figures within each segment specify the number of students in each category for that particular year.

SHIFTING PATTERNS IN COLLEGE ENROLLMENT REVEAL CHANGING STUDENT PRIORITIES FROM 2016 TO 2023



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).

SDCOE

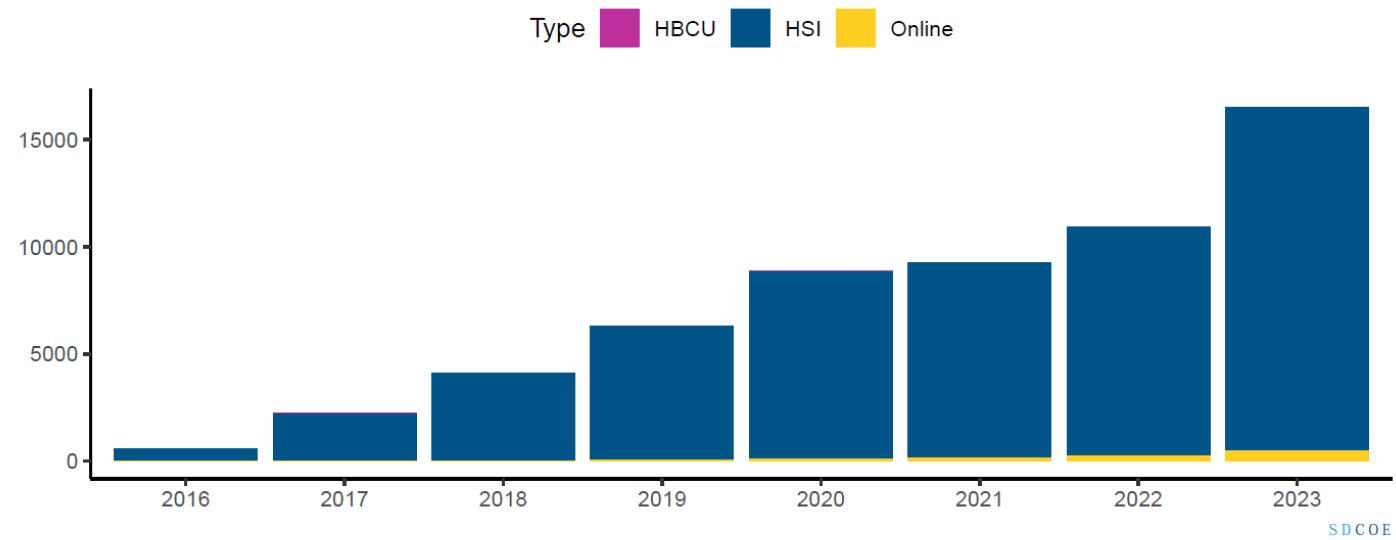
While the number of students enrolled in college has remained relatively stable, there is an increasing trend in the number of students who do not enroll in college right away. A sharp increase in not enrolled students begins in 2019 and continues into 2020 (along with a decline in overall enrollment), possibly reflecting impacts due to external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers of students who do not enroll right away continues to be high but show signs of a slow decrease in 2023. Enrolled numbers are relatively stable from 2021 to 2023 but lower than pre-pandemic levels. This chart illustrates the importance of assessing the effectiveness of interventions aimed at increasing college enrollment, given that 8 in 10 students enrolled in college immediately after high school in 2016 compared to fewer than 7 in 10 in 2023.

HBCUs, HSIs, AND ONLINE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) play pivotal roles in higher education by fostering inclusive environments that support the academic and cultural needs of Black and Hispanic students respectively. These institutions are crucial for promoting diversity, equity, and access in education, offering tailored resources that help bridge educational gaps and empower communities. Simultaneously, the rise of attending an online-only university has reshaped the educational landscape, providing flexible, accessible options that cater to non-traditional students, working professionals, and those with geographical or financial constraints. This shift toward online education highlights the growing demand for adaptable learning models that accommodate diverse student needs and lifestyles in the digital age. Nonetheless, it is crucial to thoroughly assess the outcomes of online institutions, such as student persistence and completion rates, to ensure they effectively serve students' interests.

The appeal of HBCUs, HSIs, and online-only colleges and universities is expanding among San Diego high school graduates. The chart below illustrates the enrollment trends from 2016 to 2023 across these three distinct types of higher education institutions.

MOST GRADUATES ATTEND A HISPANICALLY-SERVING INSTITUTION, WITH CONSIDERABLE GROWTH IN ONLINE-ONLY



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).

The chart shows a negligible level of enrollment for HBCUs (represented in purple) compared to HSIs and online universities. Enrollment for online-only (represented in yellow) shows steady, incremental growth from 2020 to 2023. The most striking trend is seen in the enrollment for HSIs (represented in blue), which shows a dramatic increase, particularly noticeable from 2020 onward. The jump in enrollment numbers becomes significantly steeper in the years following 2020, reaching its highest point in 2023. This suggests a robust surge in the popularity of HSIs and a dramatic increase in the number of institutions labeled as HSIs.

The rise in enrollment at online universities likely reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational preferences. As traditional institutions pivoted to remote learning and students sought fully online programs for their safety and flexibility, online universities have gained in popularity. Additionally, the growth in enrollment at HSIs (Hispanic-Serving Institutions) may be due to the increasing Hispanic population in the U.S. and efforts by these institutions to enhance their offerings and support services for Hispanic students. Notable institutions in San Diego such as San Diego State, California State San Marcos, and Southwestern College

are all classified as HSIs. Conversely, the stagnant trend observed with HBCUs could be attributed to limited capacity, competition from other institutions, or broader demographic shifts. For stakeholders, comprehending these trends is essential especially for high school counselor and others responsible for supporting students' decisions about where to attend college.

AT WHICH INSTITUTIONS ARE MOST HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES IN SAN DIEGO ATTENDING AND DO THEY STAY THERE?

Students choose particular colleges for a variety of reasons, including academic reputation, specific programs of study, location, and cultural fit. Attending a college that aligns well with one's personal and educational aspirations is crucial, as it significantly enhances the likelihood of staying engaged and completing the degree. A good fit can offer a supportive environment that fosters academic success, personal growth, and professional development. This alignment not only improves student satisfaction and performance but also plays a pivotal role in reducing stopout rates and ensuring that students can fully leverage their educational investment for future opportunities.

The following table depicts the top 25 institutions attended by San Diego high school graduates, categorized by type (2-year or 4-year), along with the total number of students (Count), the number of students retained after two years (Retained), and the percentage of students retained (Retained %).

THE TOP 25 COLLEGES ATTENDED BY SAN DIEGO GRADUATES WITH RETENTION RATES

| College Name | Level | Count | Retained | Retained (%) |
|--|--------|-------|----------|--------------|
| Southwestern College | 2-year | 2472 | 1764 | 71 |
| Palomar College | 2-year | 2268 | 1419 | 63 |
| San Diego State University | 2-year | 1550 | 1417 | 91 |
| University Of California-San Diego | 4-year | 1356 | 1271 | 94 |
| San Diego Mesa College | 2-year | 1330 | 942 | 71 |
| Grossmont College | 2-year | 1287 | 888 | 69 |
| San Diego Miramar College | 2-year | 1045 | 786 | 75 |
| California State University - San Marcos | 2-year | 996 | 754 | 76 |
| San Diego City College | 2-year | 918 | 572 | 62 |
| Cuyamaca College | 4-year | 783 | 496 | 63 |
| University Of California-Los Angeles | 4-year | 304 | 297 | 98 |
| University Of California-Santa Cruz | 4-year | 262 | 209 | 80 |
| University Of California-Santa Barbara | 4-year | 259 | 249 | 96 |
| California Polytechnic State University | 4-year | 251 | 241 | 96 |
| University Of California - Berkeley | 4-year | 227 | 218 | 96 |
| University Of California - Riverside | 4-year | 208 | 188 | 90 |
| University Of California-Davis | 4-year | 203 | 186 | 92 |
| United Education Institute- Chula Vista | 4-year | 193 | 1 | 1 |
| University Of California - Irvine | 4-year | 173 | 161 | 93 |
| Arizona State University | 4-year | 166 | 128 | 77 |

| College Name | Level | Count | Retained | Retained (%) |
|---|--------|-------|----------|--------------|
| Miracosta College | 4-year | 155 | 97 | 63 |
| California State University - Fullerton | 4-year | 131 | 113 | 86 |
| San Francisco State University | 4-year | 129 | 108 | 84 |
| University Of Arizona | 2-year | 127 | 101 | 80 |
| Santa Barbara City College | 2-year | 125 | 92 | 74 |

Several 4-year institutions like the University of California-Santa Barbara, Berkeley, Riverside, and San Diego have very high retention rates, all at 94% or higher. This indicates strong student retention practices and potentially high student satisfaction or success rates—an overall good fit for students. Conversely, 2-year institutions generally show lower retention rates compared to 4-year institutions. For instance, Southwestern College and San Diego Mesa College have retention rates of 71%, while Palomar College has 63%, all of which are lower compared to most 4-year institutions listed.

Additionally, institutions like Arizona State University and University of Arizona, which are generally well-regarded, have retention rates of 77% and 80%, respectively, suggesting good but not exceptional retention compared to the highest performers in the list. These retention percentages provide insight into how well institutions are able to keep their students from the first to the second year, which can be a critical indicator of institutional effectiveness and student satisfaction.

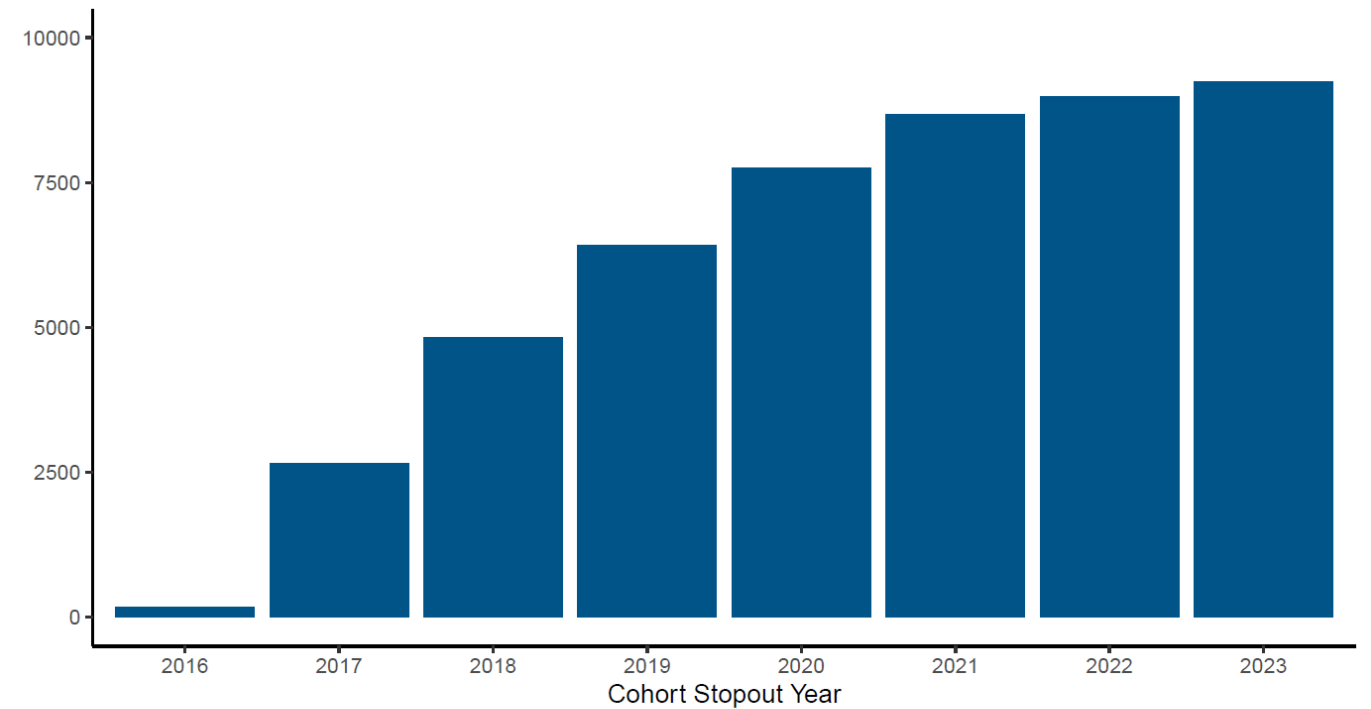
These data represent the starting point for a deeper analysis into determining the factors influencing retention rates, which could include program offerings, campus facilities, student support services, and more. Education administrators and policymakers can use this information to identify which institutions require targeted support or benefit from best practices modeled from high performers. Retention information is also a valuable data point for prospective students and their families when making educational decisions.

HOW MANY STUDENTS FROM THE CLASS OF 2016 STOPPED OUT, OR WITHDREW FROM COLLEGE?

A college stopout refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from college but intends to return and complete their degree at a later time. This interruption can be due to various reasons, including financial constraints, personal issues, or academic challenges. Preventing stopouts is crucial as it helps maintain student momentum and progress toward degree completion. Interruptions in education can lead to prolonged degree timelines and increased costs, not to mention the risk of students never returning to finish their degrees. Thus, universities and colleges focus on implementing support systems such as financial aid, counseling, and academic advising to address and mitigate the causes of stopouts, ensuring students have the resources they need to continue their education uninterrupted.

The chart below visually presents the number of students who stopped out, or temporarily or permanently withdrew, from their studies each year from 2016 to 2024. These data are shown for the class of 2016 only. Each horizontal bar represents a different year, with the length of the bar indicating the total number of stopouts in that year.

CLASS OF 2016 SHOWS STEADY STOPOUT RATES OVER SEVEN YEARS



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).
Note: Data shown for the class of 2016 only

SDCOE

The number of stopouts steadily increases over time because this metric accumulates annually, with the total nearing 9,000 by 2023. The increase from the first to the second year is particularly stark, showing nearly a fivefold rise in stopouts. This pattern, similar to that of other graduating cohorts, indicates significant retention challenges faced by the 2016 cohort, particularly during and after the pandemic.

Critics often point out that students return after a stopout. However, from 2020 to 2023, less than 780 of these stopouts returned, which represents about 9% of stopouts overall. When students leave college, they are unlikely to return.

Retention rates and stopout rates vary considerably by organization. The low number of stopouts at some institutions might indicate effective retention efforts, such as better academic support, improved student services, or more engaging campus environments. As time goes on, stopping out is more affected by other external factors such as economic conditions, changes in tuition and fees, or societal disruptions. Educational administrators might use this data to analyze the impact of specific programs aimed at reducing stopouts or to identify vulnerable cohorts that need targeted support. It may help in identifying certain years (e.g., year 1 to 2 transition) or cohorts where additional interventions may be necessary to ensure students stay on track to complete their education.

HOW MANY STOPPED OUT BASED ON RACE AND ETHNICITY?

Examining data on college stopouts by race is essential to understanding and addressing the disparities in educational outcomes among different groups. This analysis helps identify specific challenges and barriers faced by students that might contribute to their higher rates of interruption in education. By disaggregating stopout data by race, institutions can tailor interventions and support systems more effectively, ensuring that they meet the unique needs of each student group. Such strategies are critical for promoting equity in higher education, as they help minimize systemic obstacles and foster an inclusive academic environment where all students have a greater chance of achieving their educational goals without interruption.

The table below presents data on the number of students from the class of 2016 who have withdrawn from their educational institution, categorized by their race or ethnicity.

STOPOUT RATES VARY BY GROUP WITH HISPANIC STUDENTS SHOWING THE GREATEST STOPOUT RATE

| Group | Count | Percentage |
|-------------------|-------|------------|
| AIAN | 33 | 0.52% |
| African American | 376 | 5.94% |
| Asian | 231 | 3.65% |
| Filipino | 193 | 3.05% |
| Hispanic | 3169 | 50.03% |
| Not Reported | 20 | 0.32% |
| Pacific Islander | 60 | 0.95% |
| Two or more races | 349 | 5.51% |
| White | 1903 | 30.04% |

From this data, Hispanic students comprise the largest percentage of stopouts, nearly half of the total (or 3,169 students). Meanwhile, Pacific Islanders and AIAN (American Indian or Alaskan Native) students represent the smallest percentages and the smallest percentages of students overall. While students stopout for many reasons, some issues such as institutional barriers and inadequate support systems are areas higher education and K-12 systems can address. For example, high school counselors can support students in applying to best-fit colleges; when the college environment matches a student's individual needs, goals, preferences, students are more likely to stay and complete. Fit encompasses a broad range of factors that can significantly affect a student's experience and success in higher education. Students are more likely to thrive, remain enrolled, and graduate when they choose colleges that align well with their personal and academic profiles.

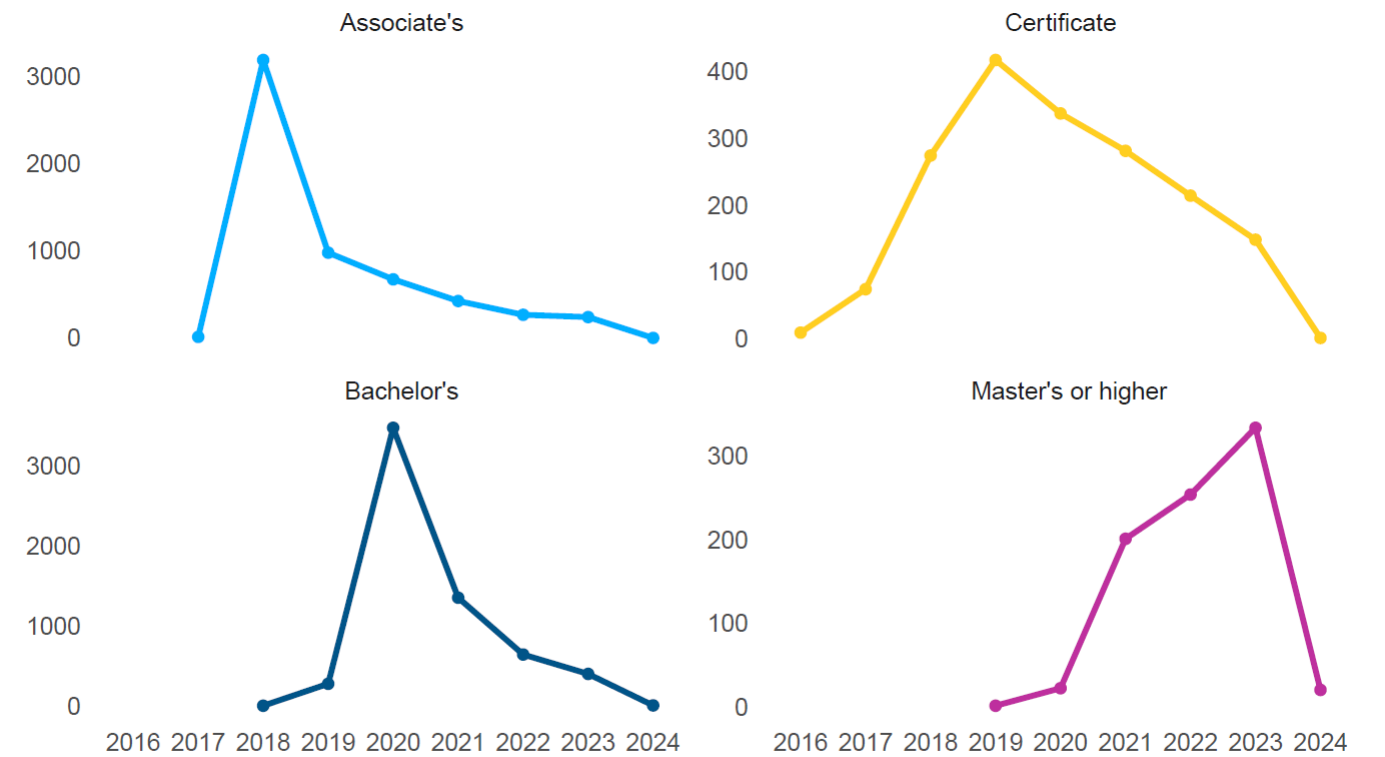
PART III: Patterns in Degree Attainment

HOW MANY STUDENTS HAVE EARNED A DEGREE EIGHT YEARS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION?

College completion rates climbed to an all-time high across the county in 2023 reaching 41%. Nearly four in 10 students from the class of 2016 and 2017 earned a college degree. Completion rates vary across two- and four-year institutions. For most four-year college students completing a bachelor's degree requires four years or more. However, at two-year institutions, students complete degrees at varying timeframes from a single year to more than four years. Success at two-year colleges is also defined by transferring to a four-year institution.

The chart below displays the counts of degrees awarded by year for the class of 2016, broken down by degree type. Each facet represents a different degree category including associate's, bachelor's, certificate, and master's or higher.

OVER 7,500 DEGREES EARNED BY 2016 GRADUATES TRACKED OVER EIGHT YEARS



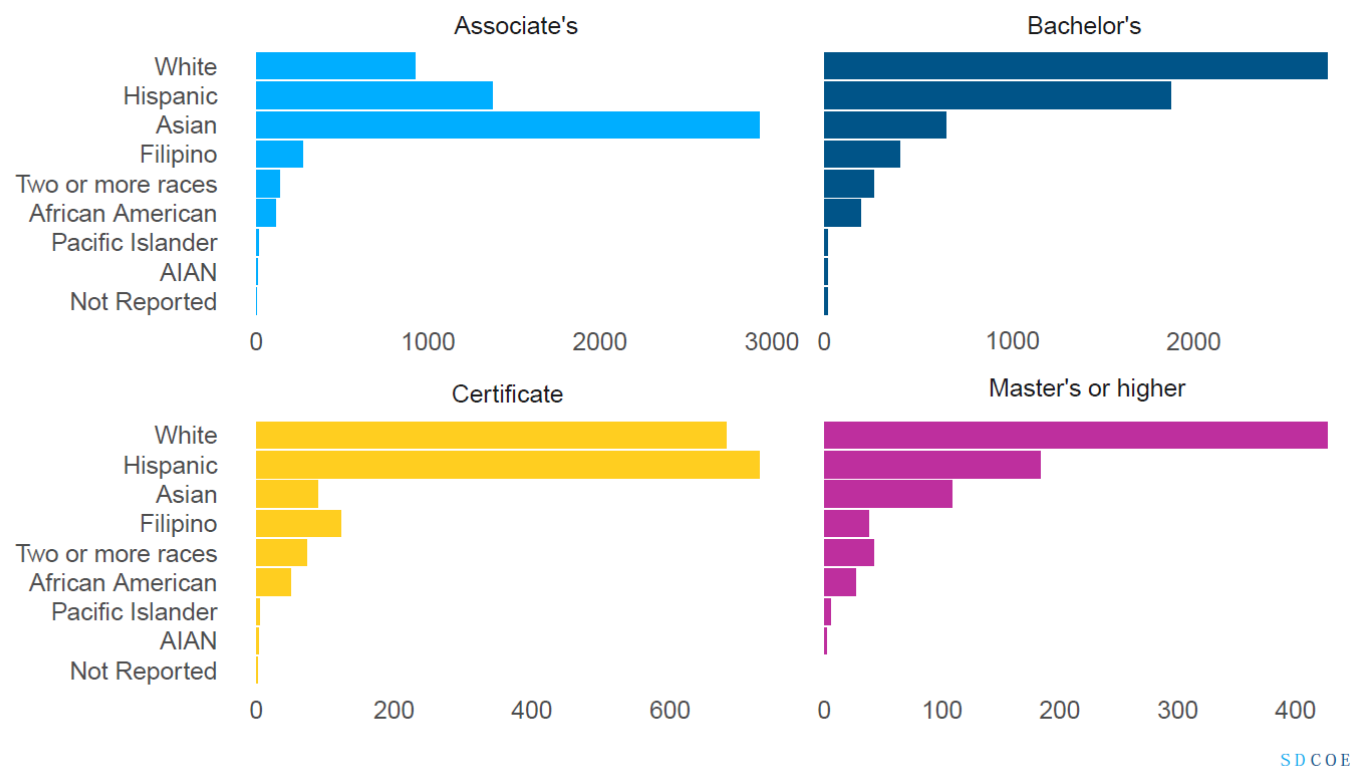
Source: National Student Clearinghouse; Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).

From this visualization, we can compare the distribution and trends of different degree types over time for the class of 2016, while allowing each category to be scaled independently. In general, the associate's and bachelor's degree categories indicate larger counts compared to the certificate and master or higher categories. Over 3,000 students have earned an associates or bachelor's degree respectively from the class of 2016 by 2024, 8 years after high school graduation. Understanding these trends in degree completions can inform prospective students about potential long-term commitments and outcomes of different degrees. On a broader scale, understanding completion outcomes contributes to discussions about social mobility, workforce development, and economic stability.

HOW MANY STUDENTS HAVE EARNED A DEGREE EIGHT YEARS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY GROUPS?

Following trends in completion across demographic factors is important to ensure opportunities exist for all students to attend and complete college. The following chart shows the number of degrees earned by race and ethnicity, categorized by the type of degree. Each degree type is represented as a separate bar chart, with the y-axis displaying different racial and ethnic groups, and the x-axis representing the number of degrees earned.

DEGREE ATTAINMENT VARIES IN THE CLASS OF 2016 ACROSS RACIAL AND ETHNIC LINES



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; Integrated Postsecondary System (IPEDS).

The Asian group has the highest number of associate degrees, followed by Hispanic, White, and Filipino. The numbers decrease moving down through other racial groups, with "Not Reported" and AIAN (American Indian and Alaska Native) having the fewest degrees. Please note that the decreasing order is reflective of the lower numbers of students in these groups enrolled in college. The White group earns the highest number of bachelor's degrees, with Hispanic and Asian groups following. There is a clear descending order in the number of degrees going down the racial groups, with "Not Reported" having the fewest. The pattern is slightly different for certificates, with the Hispanic group leading, followed by the White and Filipino groups. Other groups have significantly fewer certificates, with the least being "Not Reported" and AIAN. For higher degrees like master's or above, the White group earns the most degrees, but the total numbers are generally lower.

This visual is a powerful reminder of the institutionalized patterns in educational attainment. These disparities often stem from entrenched inequalities that begin in K-12 education and extend through higher education. To address these gaps, it is essential for the K-12 and higher education systems to collaborate more closely. Such partnerships could focus on creating seamless pathways

for underrepresented students, including enhanced advising, support programs, and early exposure to college-level coursework. Strengthening this alliance is critical to ensuring that all students, regardless of racial or ethnic background, have equitable opportunities to pursue and complete higher education, thus leveling the playing field and fostering a more inclusive and prosperous society.

HOW LONG ARE STUDENTS TAKING TO OBTAIN A CREDENTIAL OR DEGREE?

The cost of college and the duration required to earn a degree have become critical factors in educational planning and decision-making for students across the country. As tuition rates continue to rise, the financial burden on students and their families has intensified, prompting concerns about the accessibility and affordability of higher education. Concurrently, the time commitment needed to complete a degree varies widely, influenced by factors such as the field of study, institutional requirements, and the student's personal and financial circumstances. These elements combined shape the landscape of higher education, affecting career choices, economic mobility, and the overall value of a college degree in today's job market.

The following table lists different types of academic degrees along with specific majors, showing the number of degrees obtained and the average time taken to complete each degree or major.

CERTIFICATES AND ASSOCIATE'S DEGREES HAVE SIMILAR COMPLETION TIMES, WHILE THE AVERAGE BACHELOR'S DEGREE TAKES LONGER THAN FOUR YEARS

| | # Obtained | Time to Completion |
|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Degree | | |
| Certificate | 313 | 3 years 11 months |
| Associate's | 347 | 4 years 1 month |
| Bachelor's | 3082 | 4 years 6 months |
| Master's and beyond (with bachelor's) | 352 | 5 years 11 months |
| Unreported Degree Type | 3418 | 4 years 6 months |
| Majors | | |
| Business Administration | 722 | |
| Psychology | 503 | |
| Computer Science | 424 | |
| Political Science | 256 | |
| Economics | 254 | |
| Sociology | 250 | |
| Communication | 229 | |
| Mechanical Engineering | 228 | |
| Biology | 208 | |

Students from the class of 2016 have earned roughly 313 certificates, and despite being generally shorter programs, the time to complete a certificate is nearly as long as an associate's degree, which suggest potential part-time study or interruptions. The 2016 cohort has also earned 347 associate's degrees, and over 3,000 bachelor's degrees. At one point in time the standard bachelor's degree required four years to complete, however, exceeding this standard has become the norm, which suggests additional semesters needed for completion possibly due to academic challenges, changing majors, or other factors. Additionally, this group has completed 352 advanced degrees, and given the five year time frame indicates a direct continuation from undergraduate to graduate studies.

Business administration is the most popular major, which reflects broader trends in career preferences and market demands and is followed closely by psychology and computer science. Communication is the least popular of these majors with 229 students completing degrees in that field.

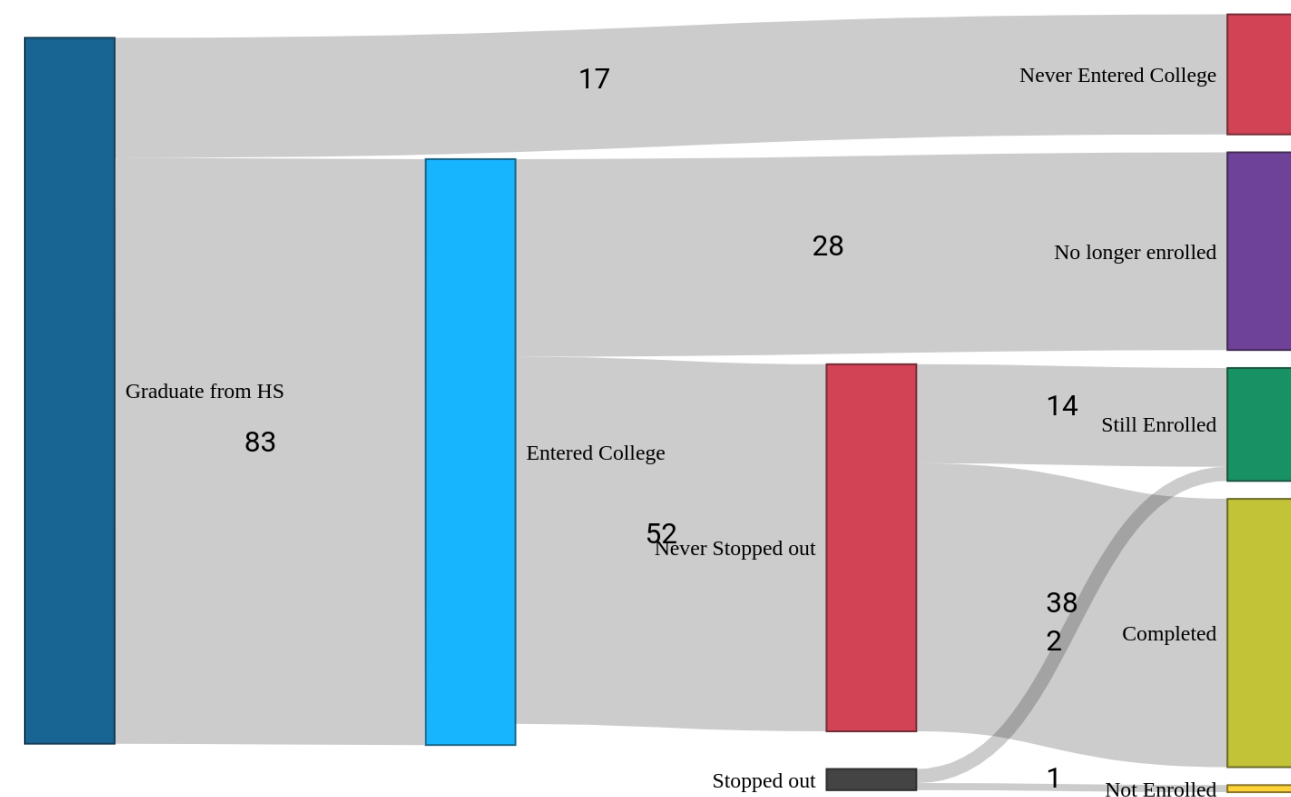
Examining time to complete college degree data provides valuable information on academic progression and completion times, useful for educational institutions for planning, student advisement, and resource allocation. It also highlights variations in degree completion times, suggesting areas where students may require additional support.

HYPOTHETICALLY, IF WE WERE TO SAMPLE 100 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY, WHAT VARIOUS PATHS MIGHT THEY TAKE AFTER GRADUATION?

After high school graduation, students face significant decisions about their future paths, each leading to distinct opportunities and challenges. Some opt for immediate entry into the workforce, seeking to gain practical experience and financial independence. Others may choose to serve in the military, which offers structured career development and the chance to serve their country. Alternatively, many students pursue higher education, attending colleges or universities to expand their knowledge, skill sets, and future career prospects. Each of these choices reflects individual goals, circumstances, and values, contributing to a diverse landscape of post-secondary trajectories that shape personal and professional lives.

The Sankey chart below provides a visualization of the pathways of the 2016 cohort of high school graduates as they transitioned through various stages of higher education or entered the workforce.

NEARLY FOUR IN 10 STUDENTS WHO START COLLEGE RIGHT AWAY EARN A COLLEGE DEGREE



Source: San Diego County Office of Education Data and Impact Center for Excellence

From the data, we can observe a total of 100 hypothetical students who graduated from high school, 83 of whom enroll in college right away while 17 never enroll.

Out of the 83, 52 enter college and never stop out. Of these 52, 14 will remain enrolled and 38 will have completed their college education.

After several years, 28 of the original 83 students will no longer be enrolled and will not have completed a degree—these students are stopouts. Combining these stopouts with the never enrolled group reveals that more than half the students in this class of graduates will not earn a college degree.

The flow from exiting high school to entering the workforce or college indicates a need for policymakers and educational institutions to work toward closing the gap in college enrollment and completion, particularly focusing on retention and support mechanisms to keep students on the path to successful completion. These strategies might include strengthening support systems in both K-12 and colleges and universities, implementing re-enrollment strategies for stopouts, and expanding access to career and technical education programs linked closely to employment paths.

PART IV: Degree Completion and Wages

HOW MUCH DO STUDENTS EARN 10 YEARS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION BY DEGREE TYPE?

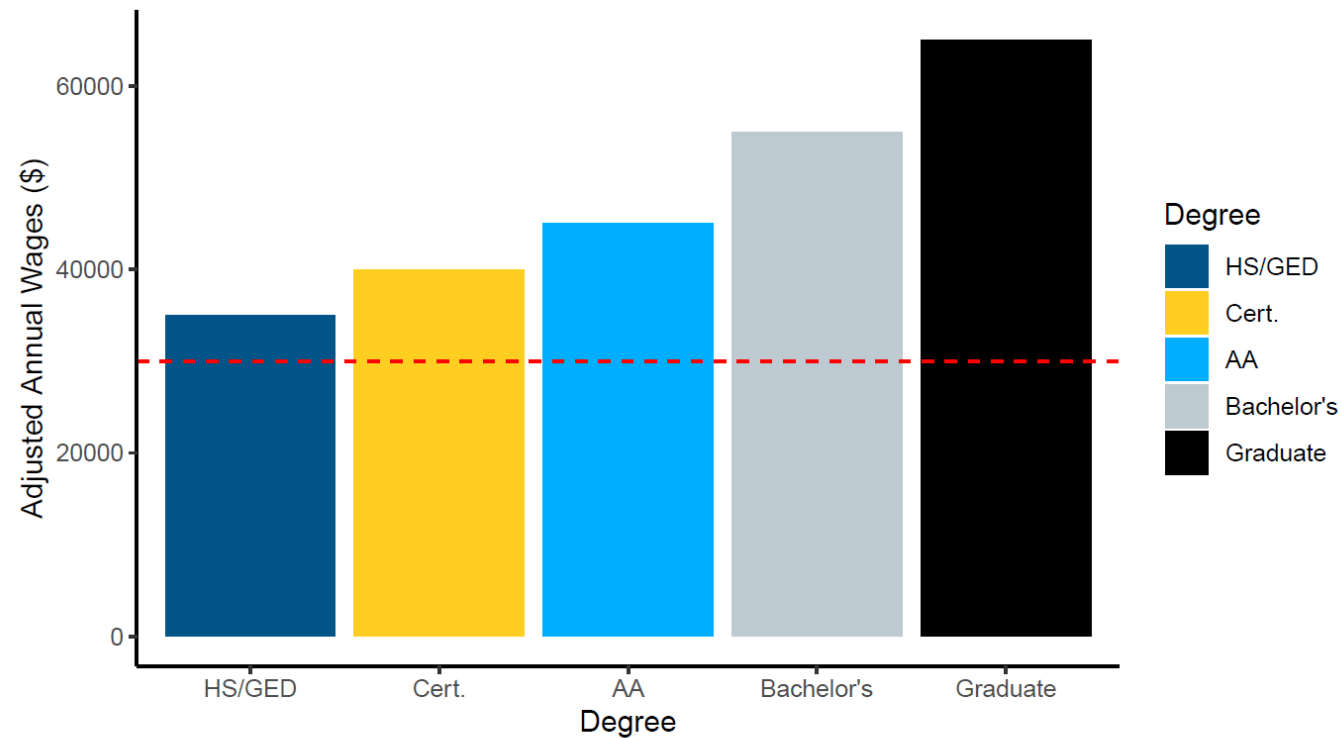
Analyzing data on annual wages 10 years after high school graduation by degree type is crucial for San Diego as it provides insight into the long-term economic outcomes of different educational paths. This information helps students, educators, and policymakers understand the return on investment for various degrees, guiding more informed decisions about career advising. Additionally, such data highlights potential disparities in earnings linked to degree choices, prompting initiatives to enhance access to more lucrative fields for underrepresented groups.

The chart below shows the mean annual wages by the highest degree attained 10 years after high school graduation and compares these wages against the statewide average living wage, which is represented by the dashed red line. Each bar on the graph represents a different level of education.

For students whose highest degree is a high school diploma or GED they stand to make a mean annual wage slightly above the statewide average living wage. Individuals earning certificates make more than those with just a high school diploma, with their earnings also slightly above the statewide average living wage. Trends begin to shift for those with degrees. These individuals earn more than those with a high school diploma or a certificate, where earnings for individuals with a bachelor's degree are nearly double the statewide average living wage. Students with graduate degrees have the highest earnings, significantly above the earnings for a high school diploma and the statewide average living wage.

Every level of education beyond high school generally corresponds to higher earnings, with both bachelor's and graduate degrees leading to mean annual wages that exceed the statewide average living wage. This data underscores the economic value of pursuing higher education in terms of earning potential and social mobility.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON EARNINGS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; MIT Living Wage

SDCOE

PART V: Key Findings

Below are the key findings from this analysis:

1. **Educational Attainment and Job Requirements:** The demand for higher education is increasing significantly in the job market. By 2031, nearly three-quarters of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education. This shift emphasizes the growing importance of higher education in securing employment and underscores the evolving job requirements over the past few decades.
2. **Patterns in College Enrollment and Retention:** A substantial portion of students do not persist in their initial college or university beyond the first year. For example, in San Diego County, only seven out of 20 college-bound students complete a degree within six years of starting. This highlights the challenges of college retention and the need for better alignment between students and institutions to enhance completion rates.
3. **Degree Attainment and Workforce Entry:** The relationship between degree attainment and wages shows that higher educational qualifications generally correspond to higher earnings. Ten years after high school graduation, individuals with graduate degrees earn significantly above the average living wage, reflecting the economic value of advanced education.
4. **Disparities in Educational Outcomes:** The data reveals significant racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment and stopout rates. Hispanic students, for example, show the highest stopout rates, which calls for targeted interventions to support these students more effectively and ensure equitable educational opportunities.

Findings from this analysis underscore the importance of aligning educational strategies with workforce needs, improving college retention and completion, addressing educational disparities, and supporting higher education as a pathway to better economic outcomes.

PART VI: Ask Yourself, Take Action

Why do these college enrollment patterns exist?

This analysis alone is not intended to pinpoint the causes of these findings. Instead, it raises a series of questions aimed at helping education leaders identify underlying causes and make informed decisions regarding policy. By posing and addressing these questions, leaders can gain a deeper understanding of the differences in outcomes, allowing them to examine the underlying trends and develop more effective strategies and solutions.

ASK YOURSELF: How are we using data to improve the college choice process within our district? How could we use data more effectively? What is preventing us from doing so?

TAKE ACTION: View data as a source of insights for improvement and long-term impact.

- Build and maintain a longitudinal student data system for tracking your students' college readiness. Include data from the National Student Clearinghouse to understand patterns of college matriculation and persistence among your graduates.
- Cultivate the analytic capacity within your organization to examine college-going outcomes for your students and pay particular attention to outcomes among your highest performing students.
- Conduct these analyses annually to take stock and to investigate whether changes in policy, strategy, or management practice are having the desired impact.
- Share these results broadly with teachers, counselors, and school leaders as a means of encouraging focus on college-going outcomes.

ASK YOURSELF: Do students and their families have a clear understanding of the steps required to apply to college, enroll, and persist through degree completion?

TAKE ACTION: Build a system of support for guiding students and their families through the college application and financial aid process.

- Making sense of college information, application forms, and financial aid materials can be challenging, especially for first-generation college goers and their families. Devise, implement, and evaluate strategies for addressing sources of confusion and information gaps.
- Evaluate the extent to which your counselors are knowledgeable about college application and financial aid processes and the extent to which their balance of work responsibilities allows them to support students in this domain.
- Ensure that all students (particularly first-generation college goers) and their families receive clear, detailed information on college choices and admissions and financial aid procedures—and that they get the help needed to navigate the long and complicated application process.

ASK YOURSELF: What are our students' postsecondary aspirations? What are the major barriers that prevent them from fulfilling these aspirations?

TAKE ACTION: Educate students and their families about the importance of earning a postsecondary degree and the path to achieving this goal.

- Cultivate a culture of college going. Work with students throughout high school to build understanding of the long-term benefits of earning a college degree and to help students devise sensible goals for postsecondary education.
- Gather information about students' college aspirations, knowledge of their options, and barriers that are impeding them from college entry and success.

ASK YOURSELF: How do we currently support high school students during the college application and transition process? What other kinds of support and assistance do they need?

TAKE ACTION: Track and support students' progress through the college application process.

- Gather information on students' success in meeting major milestones in the college application and enrollment process, and use this information to inform the supports that you offer.
- Use this information to implement programming and supports to keep students on track for college and to eliminate barriers along the college-going pipeline.
- Identify high schools in your district or in the county that serve as models for exemplary college-going outcomes and identify practices that can be replicated.
- Investigate outside resources and partnerships to support improved college-going outcomes among your students. Work with colleges to increase their outreach efforts in your high schools. Collaborate with local community-based organizations, nonprofits, and businesses on programs and practices that strengthen students' paths toward and through college.

ASK YOURSELF: How might financial, personal, and structural factors affect college selection and college-going outcomes for highly qualified students?

TAKE ACTION: Support students in making well-informed college choices.

- Understand that students' enrollment and persistence in college can be influenced by many factors, including academic preparedness, match between student and school, and the financial burden associated with continued enrollment.
- Provide support to students in selecting a college that fits well to their academic needs, financial circumstances, and future goals. For example, encourage students' use of high-quality online tools such as the [Big Future](#) from the College Board and [College Navigator](#) from the U.S. Department of Education for informing college choice. Encourage students to utilize these sites' net-price calculators to understand the difference between the "sticker" price and net price of particular colleges.
- Encourage students to apply to more than one well matched college. Many highly qualified students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, attend less selective schools simply because they do not apply to colleges for which they are well suited. Applying to more colleges may increase students' likelihood of getting accepted and enrolling in a college that provides a good academic fit.
- Learn from the experiences of highly qualified students who make sound college choices and persist to completion. Identify supports and other factors that made a difference in their success.

Conclusions

As we project a future where 72% of jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary education by 2031, it becomes imperative to understand and address the challenges currently faced by students in San Diego County. Despite the importance of higher education for career readiness and economic stability, about 33% of college freshmen in the county do not progress to their second year at the same institution, signaling a significant leakage in our educational pipeline. This report has outlined the multifaceted reasons behind such stopouts and transfers, emphasizing the need for improved alignment between students and their chosen institutions to enhance retention and completion rates.

Furthermore, the persistence of racial and economic disparities in degree completion underscores the need for targeted interventions and resources to support vulnerable student groups more effectively. It is clear that more strategic efforts are needed to equip all students, regardless of their background, with the opportunities to fulfill their educational and professional potential. This is not just a matter of educational equity but also of economic necessity, as the workforce continues to evolve toward requiring higher qualifications.

As we move forward, it is crucial for educational leaders and policymakers to leverage data-driven insights, such as those presented in this report, to implement robust support systems that address the specific needs of students at risk of non-completion. Only by doing so can we ensure that our educational systems are not only accessible but also conducive to the success of every student, thereby closing the gap between current educational outcomes and the future demands of the workforce.

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 [Student Tracker](#) 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. Use this link to access the [College Scorecard](#).

Additionally, we integrated information from the MIT Living Wage Calculator, a tool designed to estimate the minimum income needed for individuals and families to meet their basic living expenses without relying on public or private assistance. It calculates the living wage based on typical expenses such as food, childcare, health insurance, housing, transportation, and other necessities. Developed by Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier at MIT, the calculator also adjusts for geographical differences in cost of living, providing localized estimates for wages required to live modestly and securely in various regions across the United States.

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. Use this [link](#) for CDE data.

Acknowledgements

Harvard's Strategic Data Project works with education agencies to find and train data leaders to uncover trends, measure solutions, and effectively communicate evidence to stakeholders. Much of the work for this project was inspired and adapted from many of SDPs longitudinal data [toolkits](#).

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