

# ***Undergraduate Degree Earners***

## *Academic Year 2021-22*



The Undergraduate Degree Earners report series, published annually, provides demographic and educational profile data for all students graduating with an undergraduate credential each year. Undergraduate credentials may include associate and bachelor's degrees and certificates. In the current report, we profile graduates in the 2021-22 academic year, with a focus on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and changes in demographics and education credentials received since the 2012-13 academic year. The [Appendix](#) provides state-level and regional trends, in addition to the national graduate profiles by age and type of credential received.

## HIGHLIGHTS – Academic Year 2021-22

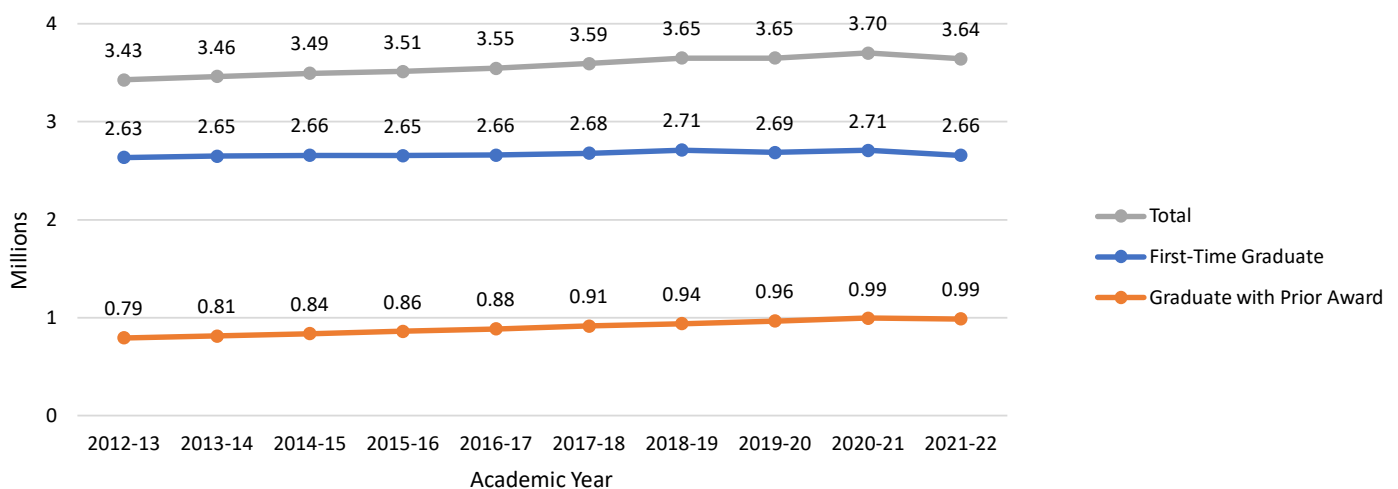
- Undergraduate credential earners fell for the first time in a decade (-1.6% or -58,800 from a year earlier).
- This decline was caused by an unprecedented one-year loss of 50,700 first-time graduates (-1.9% over the previous year).
- Among first-time graduates, associate degree completions fell sharply (-7.6% or -56,800), followed by baccalaureate recipients (-2.4% or -36,000). First-time bachelor's degree earners fell for the first time in a decade. In contrast, first-time certificate completers grew considerably (+9.0% or +42,200).
- Declines are particularly steep among first-time graduates 25 years and older (-4.1% or -30,600). Declines are smaller among graduates 24 years and younger (-1.0% or -19,100).
- Baccalaureate earners who had a prior associate degree decreased this year against the historical trend, down by 2.5 percent (-11,600). It has caused the overall non-first-time graduate numbers to slide for the first time in a decade (-0.8% or -8,100).

**Undergraduate credential earners fell for the first time in a decade (-1.6% or -58,800 from a year earlier). This decline was caused by an unprecedented one-year loss of 50,700 first-time graduates (-1.9% over the previous year).**

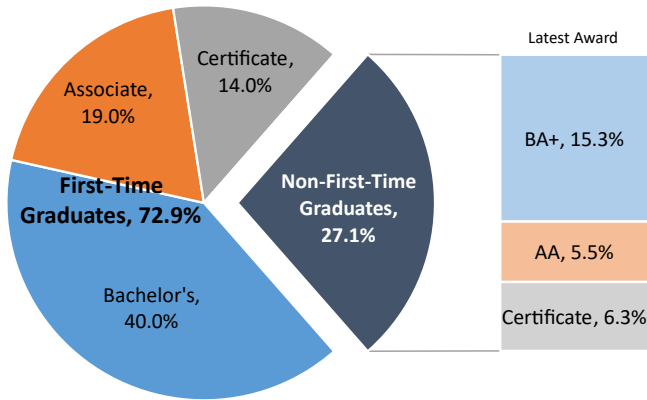
For the first time in a decade, undergraduate credential earners declined, losing 1.6 percent or 58,800 fewer people than the previous year. This totals to 3.64 million people earning a credential in 2021-22, a number not seen in four years (since 2018-19; see **Figure 1**).

This decline was caused by an unprecedented one-year loss of first-time graduates (-1.9% or -50,700 graduates), accounting for 86.2 percent of the overall decline. This marks the largest decline in first-time graduates since 2012-13, for which we have the data available. Graduates with a prior award also fell but at a smaller rate than first-time graduates (-0.8% or -8,100; see Figure 1). As a result, first-time graduates are a declining share of the overall undergraduate credential earners, comprising 72.9 percent in 2021-22 (see **Figure 2**).

**Figure 1. Overall Undergraduate Credential Earners**



**Figure 2. 2021-22 Graduate Profile (N = 3.6M)**



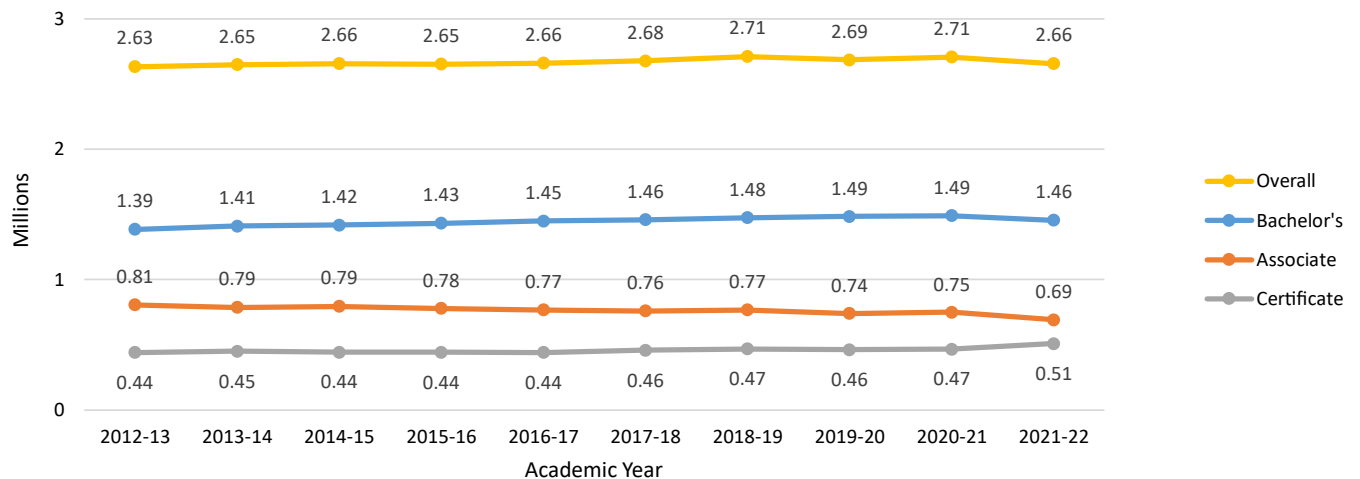
**Among first-time graduates, associate degree completions fell sharply (-7.6% or -56,800), followed by baccalaureate recipients (-2.4% or -36,000). First-time bachelor's degree earners fell for the first time in a decade. In contrast, first-time certificate completers grew considerably (+9.0% or +42,200).**

Fueling the first-time completers loss, associate degree completers dropped 7.6 percent (-56,800) this year after a 1.2 percent increase last year (+9,000; see **Figure 3**). Although associate degree earners were on a steady decline over the last ten years, losing, on average, more than 12,600 students a year (see **Appendix**), their declines were magnified this year.

Bachelor's degree completers declined 2.4 percent (-36,000), marking the first decline in a decade (see Figure 3). This decline nearly erases the last 4 years of growth of baccalaureates (+2.8% or +41,000 from 2017-18 to 2020-21; see Appendix).

In contrast, first-time certificate earners saw the largest one-year increase to date (+9.0% or +42,200). This continues the upward trend seen in the recent years (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. First-Time Credential Earners by Type of Award**

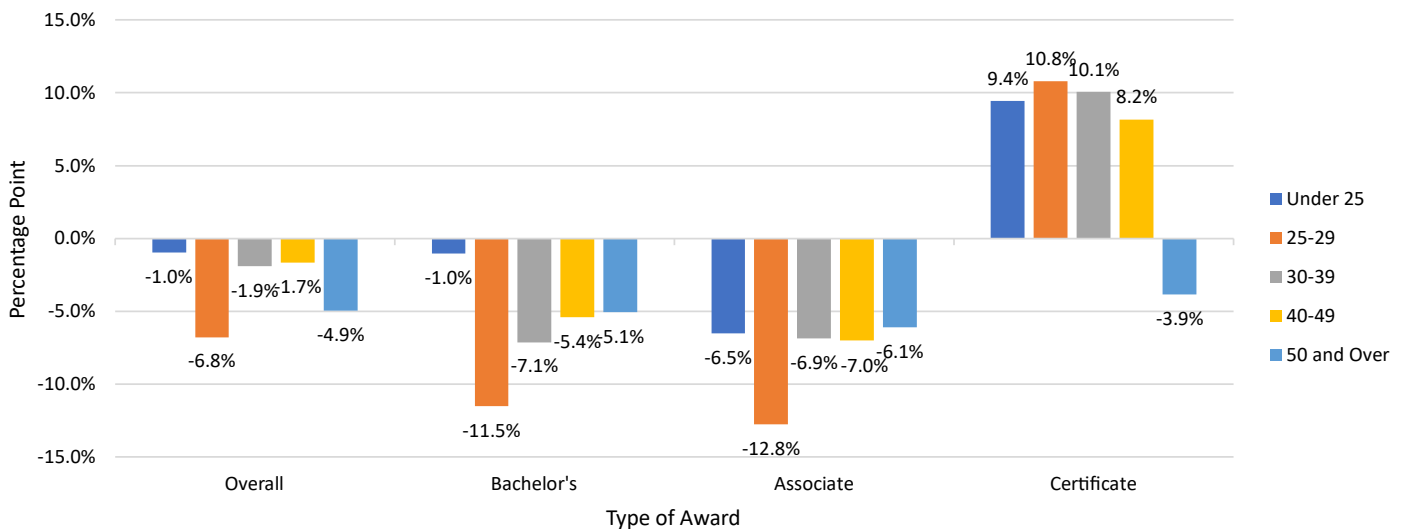


**Declines are particularly steep among first-time graduates 25 years and older (-4.1% or -30,600). Declines are smaller among graduates 24 years and younger (-1.0% or -19,100).**

The number of credential earners 25 years and older declined (-4.1% or -30,600). Associate and bachelor's degree recipients contributed most to this loss, falling 9.3 percent (-25,700) and 8.9 percent (-22,600), respectively, since last year (see Appendix). Certificate completers increased across most age groups except those 50 years and older (see **Figure 4**).

The overall number of first-time credential earners who were 24 years and younger decreased 1.0 percent (-19,100) after little growth last year (+0.2% or +3,000; not shown in Appendix). Associate degree earners dropped far more than bachelor's degree recipients within this traditional age group (-6.5% or -30,700 versus -1.0% or -13,000 for bachelor's degree earners; see Appendix).

**Figure 4. Change in Number of First-Time Credential Earners by Age at Graduation and Type of Award: 2020-21 to 2021-22**

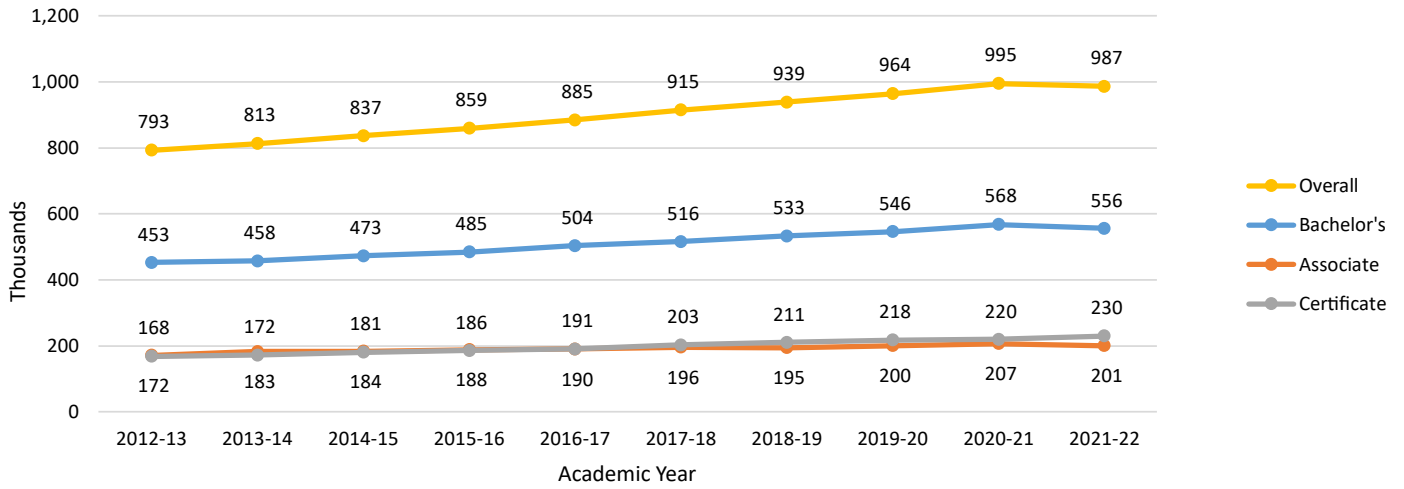


**Baccalaureate earners who had a prior associate degree decreased this year against the historical trend, down by 2.5 percent (-11,600). It has caused the overall non-first-time graduate numbers to slide for the first time in a decade (-0.8% or -8,100).**

Bachelor's degree earners who had previously attained an associate degree declined this year (-2.5% or -11,600; see Appendix). Up until this year, this number has been steadily growing since we began tracking in 2012-13. The loss of baccalaureate earners with a prior associate degree is the main cause for the overall non-first-time graduate decline for the first time in a decade.

Unlike first-time earners, where associate degrees fell more than bachelor's degrees, the declines in bachelor's degree earners outnumbered associate degree earners (-2.1% or -12,000 versus -3.1% or -6,400 for associate degree recipients; see **Figure 5**).

**Figure 5. Graduates with a Prior Award by Current Award Type**



To summarize, college graduates earning an undergraduate credential fell for the first time in a decade. This was caused by an unprecedented loss of first-time graduates, particularly those earning an associate or bachelor’s degree. These unusual losses were somewhat offset by increases in certificate completers. Although students of all age categories contributed to the degree attainment shortfalls among first-time graduates, those 25 years and older experienced the steepest declines.

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## Methodological Notes

The *Undergraduate Degree Earners Report* provides a basic demographic and education credential profile for all students who are graduating with an undergraduate level credential each year, which may include associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, or certificates. In this report, we profile the undergraduate credential earners during the most recent academic year 2021-22, focusing on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and examine change over time in student demographics (gender and age) and credentials attained (AA, BA, or certificates) since the 2012-13 academic year. Trend data are analyzed for the nation, as well as by state and by region, all of which can be found in the [Appendix](#). All data prior to the 2021-22 academic year reflects newer and additional data reported to the Student Clearinghouse since last year's publication.

### Definition of *First-Time Graduate*

Students are considered to be first-time graduates if the credential attained during the reported academic year (July 1 to June 30) is their first postsecondary award from a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. A student who earned two credentials in the academic year of his or her first credential is counted under the highest level of credential attained in that year. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

### Degree Data Coverage and Weighting

The National Student Clearinghouse collects graduation information from its participating institutions via two data reporting services: Enrollment Reporting (ER) and DegreeVerify (DV). Enrollment Reporting has slightly higher data coverage rates, but for credentials reported prior to 2013-14, it generally includes only basic completion information, such as graduation indicator and the date of graduation. DV includes enhanced information on completions, including degree title, major, level, and CIP code, and comprised 95 percent of credentials granted by Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as of fall 2018. The overall undergraduate credential earner numbers each year are based only on awards reported to DV, but prior award status is determined by records from

both ER and DV. In cases where the prior award did not appear in a DV record (approximately 1.9% of the 2017 bachelors' degree earners, 2.7% of associate degree earners and 2.4% of certificate earners), the level of the prior award was imputed based on the institution level and related enrollment records. To adjust for the DV participation rate, weights were applied to each degree record included in this report. Weights were derived by calculating the inverse of the rate of degree data coverage for each combination of year, institution sector, award level (BA, AA, or certificate), and student gender. To obtain degree data coverage for each combination of year, sector, and award level, Clearinghouse degree data were compared to IPEDS Completions Survey data for all Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

### Imputation of Gender

Gender data were reported for over 80 percent of students included in this report. Missing gender data were imputed using a table of name-gender pairs that the Research Center developed using data from the Census Bureau and the Social Security Administration as well as the institution-reported data. The imputation used only those pairs in which the name had at least two instances and was associated with a single gender in at least 95 percent of the instances. The imputation is accurate in 99.6 percent of the cases with known gender.

### Degree-Granting Status

When referencing IPEDS postsecondary awards data, it is important to distinguish degree-granting institutions from non-degree-granting institutions. Clearinghouse certificate and degree data, as well as the IPEDS comparison data used for the weighting calculation in this report, are limited to degrees and certificates awarded by Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

### Suggested Citation

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