

## First-Time Postsecondary Students' Persistence After 3 Years

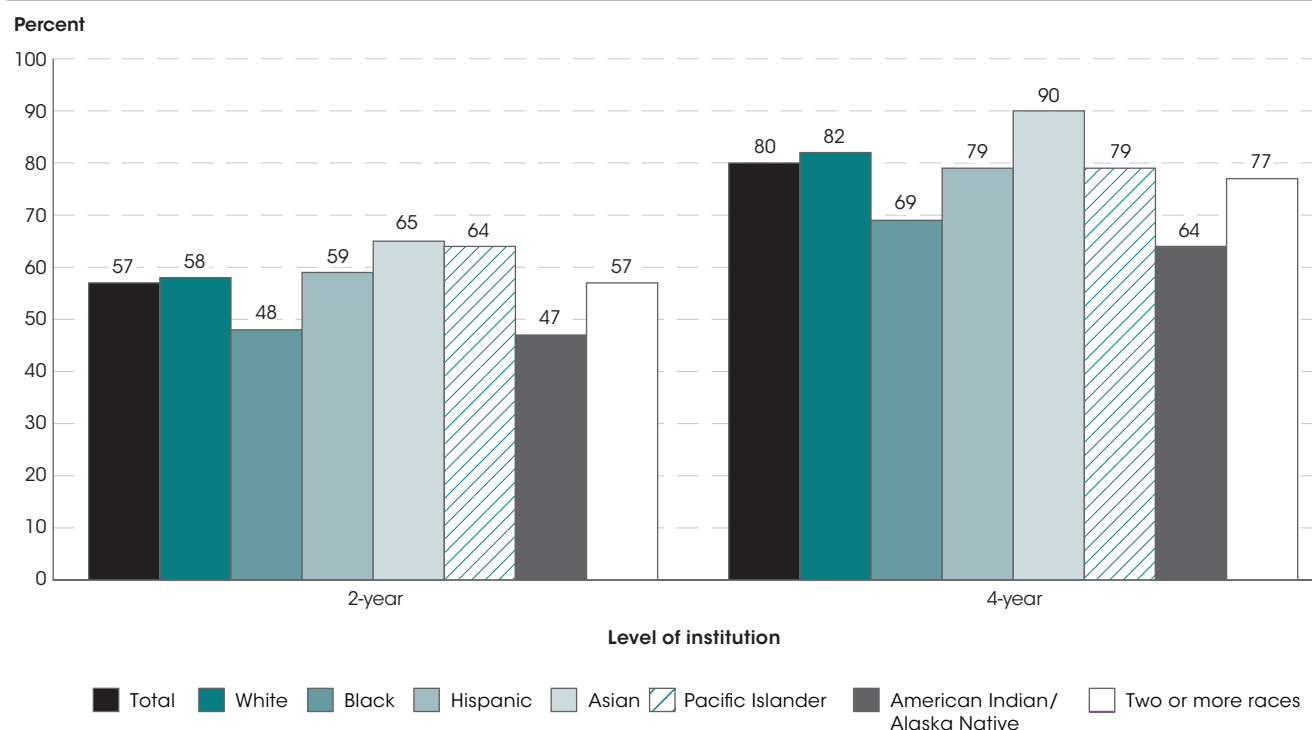
*Seventy percent of all first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions in 2011–12 were still enrolled or had attained a certificate or degree by spring 2014. However, this percentage, also known as a persistence rate, varied by institutional, academic, and student characteristics, including level (2- and 4-year) and control (public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit) of institution, SAT or ACT scores, student age, and race/ethnicity. For example, the persistence rate for students who began at 2-year institutions (57 percent) was 23 percentage points lower than for students who began at 4-year institutions (80 percent). At 4-year institutions, students who were 19 years old or younger when they began had a higher persistence rate (85 percent) than students who were 20 to 23 years old (53 percent), 24 to 29 years old (48 percent), and 30 years old or over (57 percent).*

Persistence in postsecondary education is important as continued enrollment is a necessary condition for timely completion of a bachelor's or associate's degree. In this Spotlight, students are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution or had attained a degree or certificate 3 years after first enrolling. Research indicates that persistence and attainment rates for college students vary by socioeconomic, academic, and postsecondary institution characteristics. A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study found that male students were less likely than female students to attain an associate's or bachelor's degree 6 years after enrollment when controlling for other student, family, high school, and postsecondary institutional characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, high school noncompleters as well as completers with weak academic credentials (low scores and/or grades) were

less likely to enroll at 4-year institutions and ultimately complete undergraduate studies than their high school peers with stronger academic credentials.<sup>2</sup> Another NCES report found that persistence and attainment rates 5 years after first enrolling in college were lower for nontraditional students (identified as those who worked full time or had children, among other characteristics) than for traditional students.<sup>3</sup>

This Spotlight, using the latest data from NCES's Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) longitudinal study, explores differences in postsecondary persistence rates 3 years after initial enrollment. BPS follows a cohort of students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in 2011–12 and collects data on student persistence, attainment, demographic characteristics, employment, marital status, income, and debt.

**Figure 1. Persistence rates of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by race/ethnicity: Spring 2014**



NOTE: Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Students who first enrolled during the 2011–12 academic year are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution in Spring 2014 or had attained a degree or certificate by that time.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

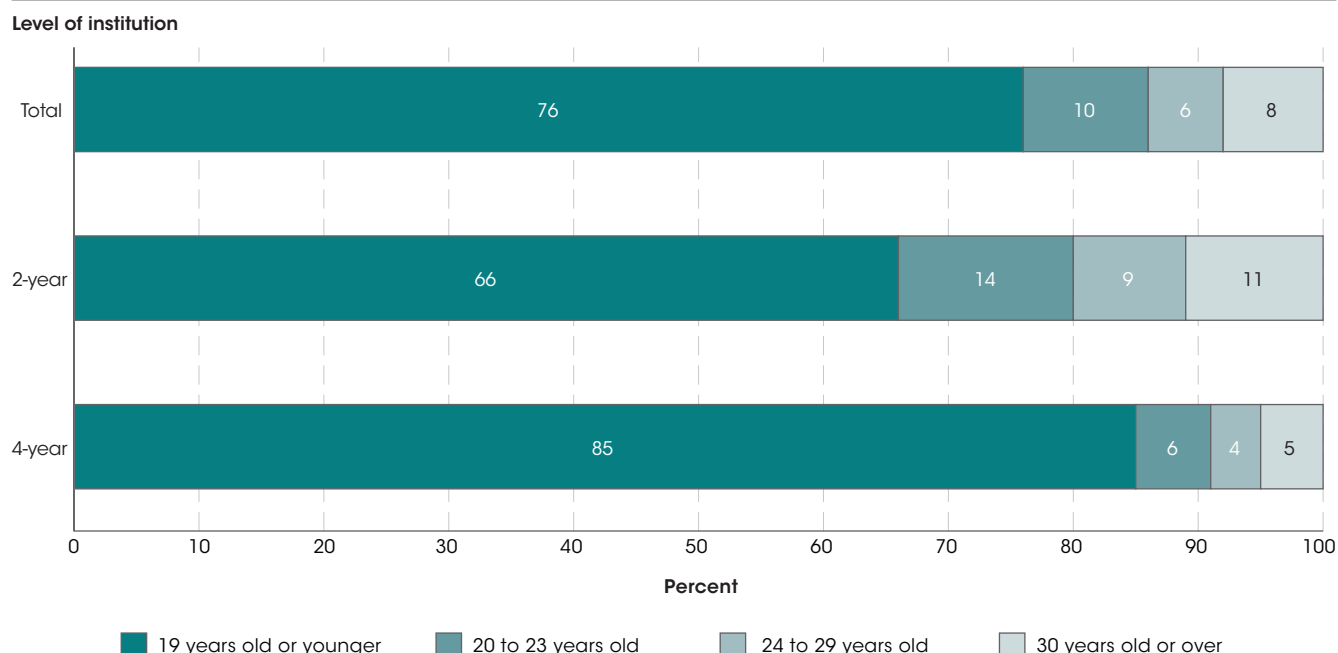
In spring 2014, the persistence rate for students who began at 2-year institutions (57 percent) in 2011–12 was 23 percentage points lower than for students who began at 4-year institutions (80 percent). This gap was observed for students who were White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and of Two or more races. The difference in persistence rates between students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions ranged from 19 percentage points for Hispanic students (59 versus 79 percent) to 25 percentage points for White students (58 versus 82 percent) and Asian students (65 versus 90 percent).

Among first-time students who began at 4-year institutions in 2011–12, Asian students had a higher persistence rate (90 percent) as of spring 2014 than White

students (82 percent). Both Asian and White students had a higher persistence rate than Hispanic (79 percent), Black (69 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (64 percent).

Black students who began at 2-year institutions had a lower persistence rate (48 percent) than their White (58 percent), Hispanic (59 percent), and Asian (65 percent) peers. However, there was no measurable difference in persistence rates among the other racial/ethnic groups. For instance, unlike at 4-year institutions, the persistence rate for Hispanic students who began at 2-year institutions was not measurably different from the persistence rates for Asian and White students.

**Figure 2. Percentage distribution of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by level of institution and age when first enrolled: 2012**

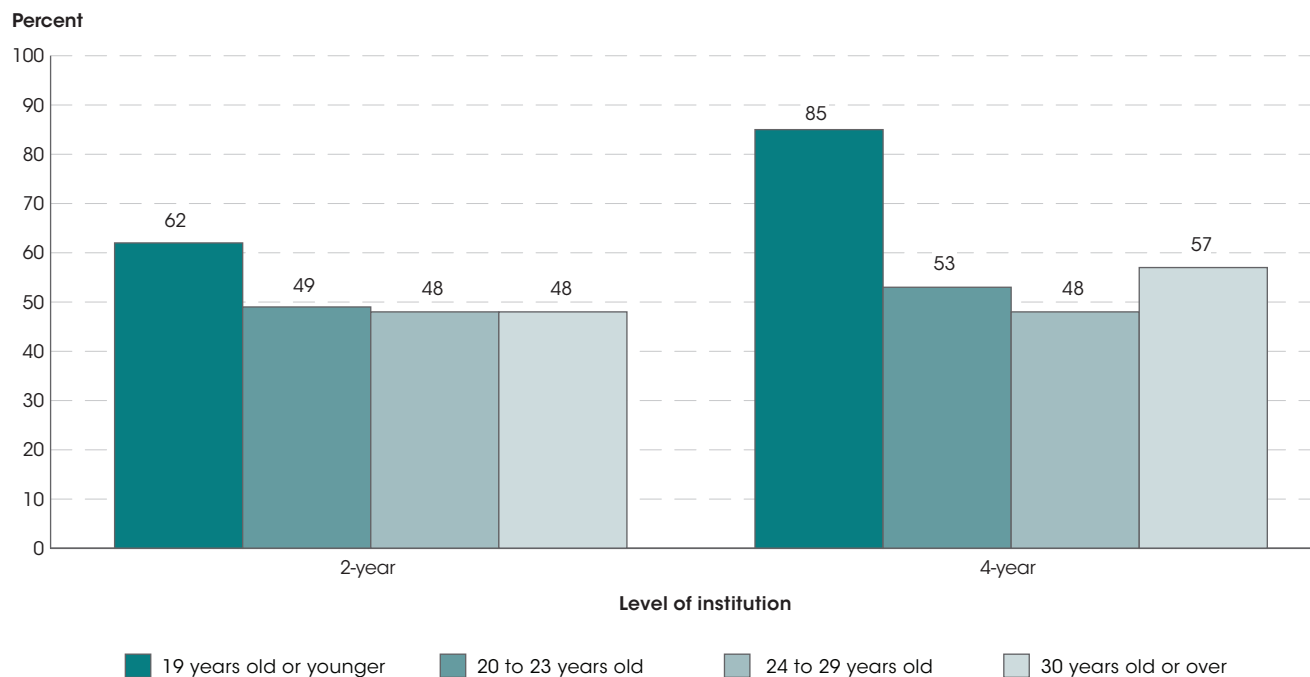


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

Students 19 years old or younger as of December 2011 accounted for the majority of first-time postsecondary students in 2011–12, and students in this age group had higher persistence rates than students who began their postsecondary education when they were 20 to 23 years old, 24 to 29 years old, and 30 years or older. However, the distribution of students by age group differed by level of institution (i.e., 2- and 4-year institutions). At 4-year

institutions, students who were 19 years old or younger made up 85 percent of first-time students. This was nearly 20 percentage points higher than the share of students who were 19 years old or younger at 2-year institutions (66 percent). Conversely, students from the three older age groups combined to account for 15 percent of students who began at 4-year institutions, compared to 34 percent at 2-year institutions.

**Figure 3. Persistence rates of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by age when first enrolled: Spring 2014**



NOTE: Students who first enrolled during the 2011–12 academic year are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution in Spring 2014 or had attained a degree or certificate by that time.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

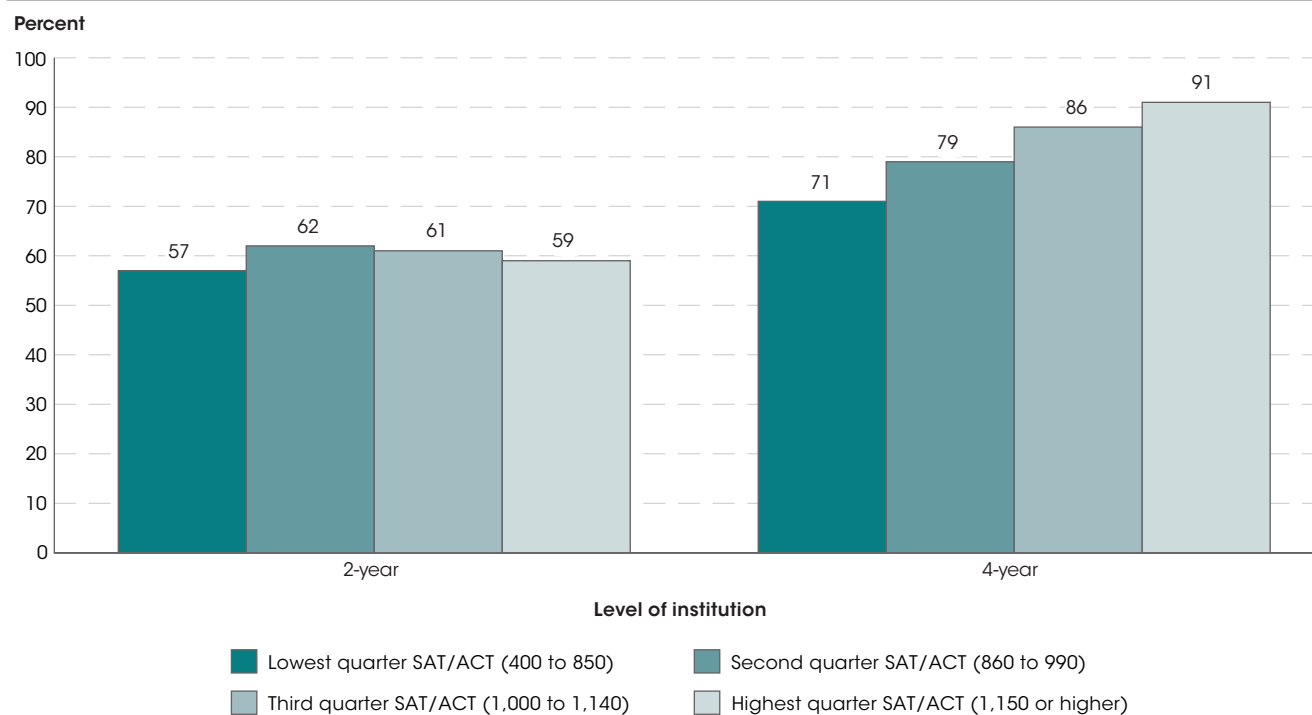
Among students who began at 4-year institutions, the persistence rate for students who were 19 years old or younger (85 percent) was higher than students who were 20 to 23 years old (53 percent), 24 to 29 years old (48 percent), and 30 years old or over (57 percent). There was no measurable difference between the persistence rates for the oldest three age groups who began at 4-year institutions. The same pattern was observed for first-time students who began at 2-year institutions. Students 19 years old or younger had the highest persistence rate (62 percent), while there was no measurable difference in persistence rates between the three older age groups, which ranged from 48 to 49 percent.

The persistence rate for students 19 years old or younger who began at 2-year institutions (62 percent) was

24 percentage points lower than the rate for their same-aged peers who began at 4-year institutions (85 percent). There were no measurable differences in persistence rates by level of institution for students who began their postsecondary education when they were 20 to 23 years old, 24 to 29 years old, and 30 years old or over.

Initial enrollment at 4-year institutions and persistence varied by SAT or ACT scores.<sup>4</sup> Some 41 percent of students who scored in the lowest quarter of SAT/ACT scores began at 4-year institutions, compared to 82 percent of students who scored in the highest quarter of SAT/ACT scores.

**Figure 4. Persistence rates of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by SAT/ACT score quarter: Spring 2014**



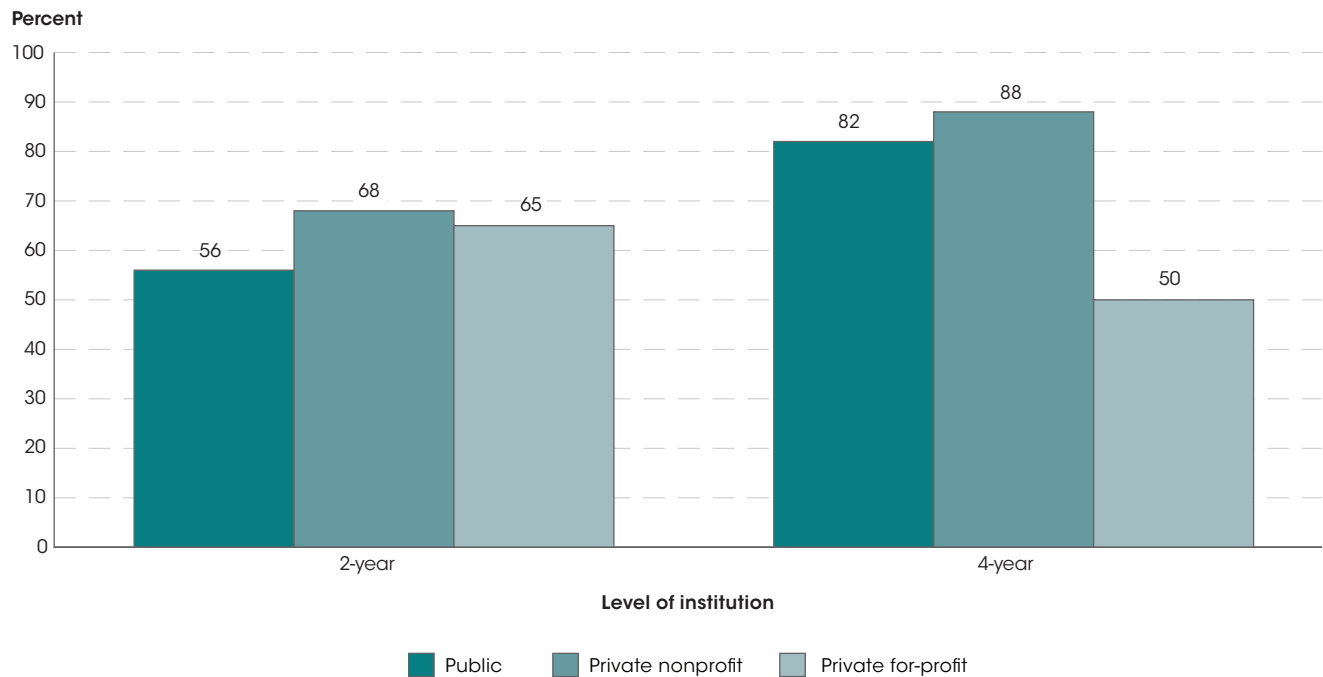
NOTE: Students who first enrolled during the 2011–12 academic year are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution in Spring 2014 or had attained a degree or certificate by that time. Score quarters are based on the SAT combined critical reading and mathematics score; scale ranges from 400 to 1600. ACT scores for students who only took the ACT exam were converted to SAT scores using a concordance table from the following source: Dorans, N. (1999). *Correspondences Between ACT and SAT I Scores* (College Board Report No. 99-1). New York: College Entrance Examination Board. SAT combined scores were restricted to respondents less than 30 years old.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

Among students who began at 4-year institutions, students who scored in the highest quarter of SAT/ACT scores had higher persistence rates (91 percent) than students who scored in the third quarter (86 percent), second quarter (79 percent), and lowest quarter (71 percent) of SAT/ACT scores. There was no measurable difference in persistence rates between the

SAT/ACT score groups for students who began at 2-year institutions, which typically do not require SAT/ACT scores for admission. Within each SAT/ACT score quarter, persistence rates were higher for students who began at 4-year institutions than for students who began at 2-year institutions.

**Figure 5. Persistence rates of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by control of first institution: Spring 2014**



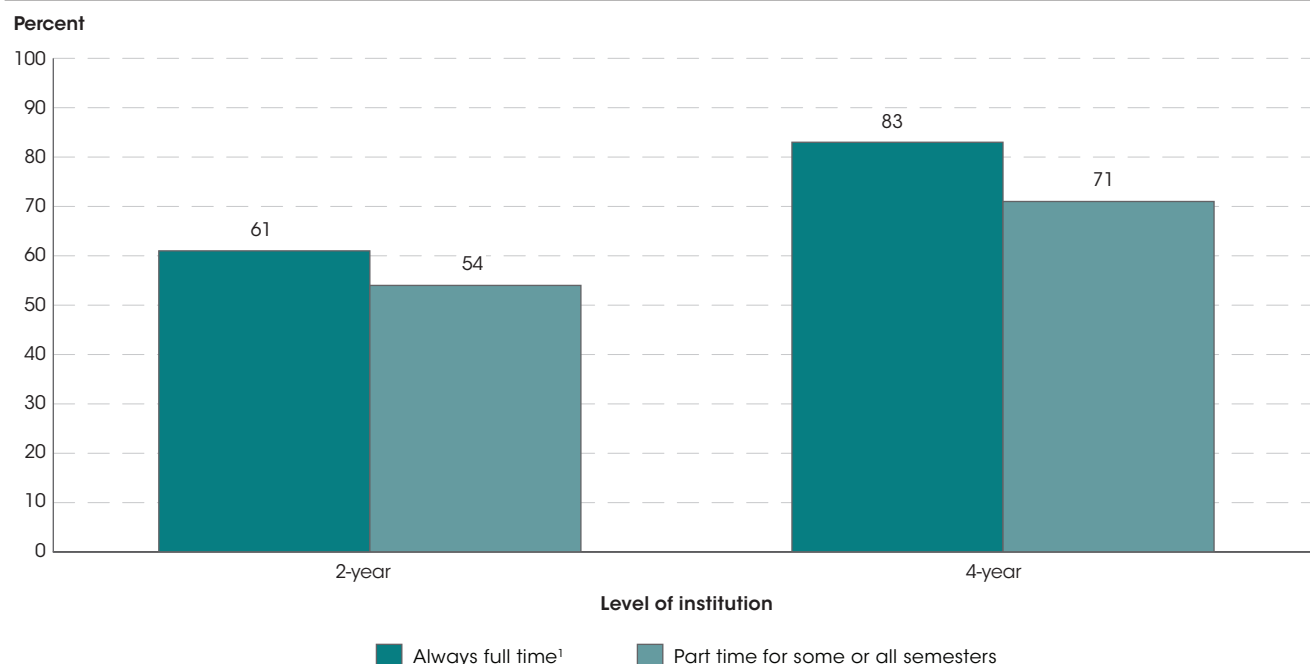
NOTE: Students who first enrolled during the 2011–12 academic year are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution in Spring 2014 or had attained a degree or certificate by that time.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

Persistence rates at 4-year institutions varied by control of institution (public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit). Students who began at private nonprofit 4-year and public 4-year institutions had persistence rates (88 percent and 82 percent, respectively) more than

30 percentage points higher than students who began at private, for profit 4-year institutions (50 percent). Among students who began at 2-year institutions, there was no measurable difference in persistence rates by control of institution.

**Figure 6. Persistence rates of first-time postsecondary students who began at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2011–12 academic year, by attendance intensity: Spring 2014**



<sup>1</sup> Full-time undergraduate students are typically enrolled for at least 12 semester or quarter hours per term or at least 24 clock hours per week.

NOTE: Students who first enrolled during the 2011–12 academic year are considered to have persisted if they were enrolled at any institution in Spring 2014 or had attained a degree or certificate by that time.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/14 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/14). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50.

The persistence rate for students who began at 4-year institutions and were full-time students<sup>5</sup> from 2011–12 to spring 2014 (83 percent) was 12 percentage points higher than for students who began at 4-year institutions and were part-time students for at least one semester

(71 percent). Likewise, students who began at 2-year institutions and remained full-time students throughout had a higher persistence rate (61 percent) than their peers who began at 2-year institutions and were part-time students for at least one semester (54 percent).

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Ross, T., Kena, G., Rathbun, A., KewalRamani, A., Zhang, J., Kristapovich, P., and Manning, E. (2012). *Higher Education: Gaps in Access and Persistence Study* (NCES 2012-046). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved December 14, 2016, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012046>.

<sup>2</sup> Finn, J.D. (2006). *The Adult Lives of At-Risk Students: The Roles of Attainment and Engagement in High School*. (NCES 2006-328). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 3, 2017, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006328>.

<sup>3</sup> Horn, L.J. (1997). *Nontraditional Undergraduates: Trends in Enrollment From 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment Among 1989–90 Beginning Postsecondary Students* (NCES 97-578). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 3, 2017, from

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=97578>.

Nontraditional students were identified as those who delayed postsecondary entry by 1 or more years, enrolled part time in the fall of first year, were financially independent, worked 35 or more hours per week, were single parents, had children, or did not receive a standard high school diploma.

<sup>4</sup> SAT/ACT score quarters were derived from SAT I combined (critical reading and math) scores or an ACT composite score converted to an estimated SAT I combined score using a College Board concordance table. Students who did not take the SATs nor ACTs or students with missing values were excluded from these comparisons.

<sup>5</sup> Full-time undergraduate students are typically enrolled for at least 12 semester or quarter hours per term or at least 24 clock hours per week.

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, table 326.50

**Related indicators and resources:** Undergraduate Enrollment, Immediate Transition to College, College Enrollment Rates, Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates, Differences in Postsecondary Enrollment Among Recent High School Completers [*The Condition of Education 2016 Spotlight*]

**Glossary:** Control of institutions, Gap, Postsecondary education, Postsecondary institutions (basic classification by level), Private institution, Public school or institution, Racial/ethnic group, SAT