

# ***Completing College***

## State Report



## Overview

In our [Completing College National Report](#) released in December 2019, we reviewed national six-year college completion outcomes for 2.3 million first-time beginning college students in the fall of 2013. In this update we provide comparable six-year completion outcomes by state for the same student cohort.

As the national report showed, the college completion rate has been rising steadily for the past five cohort years (2009-2013). States generally follow this pattern, with overall completion rate gains in each of the three largest institutional sectors, public four- and two-year and private nonprofit four-year institutions. (Private for-profits are not included in the state-level analysis due to uneven historical data coverage.) State-level data also unveils disparities among states and some state nuances that are not readily detected in the aggregate.

The national six-year completion rate reached 60 percent in 2019 for the 2013 entering cohort, a new high since we started tracking such data nine years ago. State results further confirm that progress is made in nearly all states and not driven by a few large or fast-growing states. Moreover, the gaps in completion rates among states appear to be narrowing.

The completion rate for students starting at community colleges, although generally increasing, varies more by state in the rate of increase compared to the public four-year rate. Consistent with the national trend, we found first-time beginning students in many states also becoming more traditional in demographics and enrollment patterns.

In this report we define completion rate as the percent of first-time students earning their first undergraduate degree or certificate within six years of enrolling, including those who stopped out or transferred to a different institution along the way. We also present the persistence rate, the percent still enrolled anywhere in the U.S. six years later without any earned credential. These rates vary significantly by student characteristics and educational pathways, hence we show in the Appendix disaggregated outcomes by such factors for each state. For the purpose of analysis, state is defined as the state in which the student first enrolled in college. This is not necessarily the state of residency nor the state in which the student graduated from high school.

While some of the key finding are presented here, readers are encouraged to view details for each state by downloading the [Appendix](#).

## Key Findings

### **New trend data reveals a steady rise in the overall college completion rate across states and a narrowing of cross-state disparities.**

Steady gains in the national completion rate are born out in the state-level data. New trend data shows not only the rise of the overall six-year college completion rate in most states but also a narrowing of the completion rate gaps across states over the last five cohort years (2009-2013), for which reliable historical data are available (see **Table 1** in the [Appendix](#) and **Figure 1** below). Low-performing states are making progress enough to narrow the distance from high-performers, while the top states do not stand still and continue to improve. Disparities among states remain substantial, as **Figure 2** shows, but are narrowing gradually. When indexed to the highest completion rate of all states (set at 100), a way of gauging how far states stand from the top state, for the 2013 cohort, half the states are at least at the 80 percent level of the top rate, in comparison to only 13 states for the 2009 cohort (see Table 1).

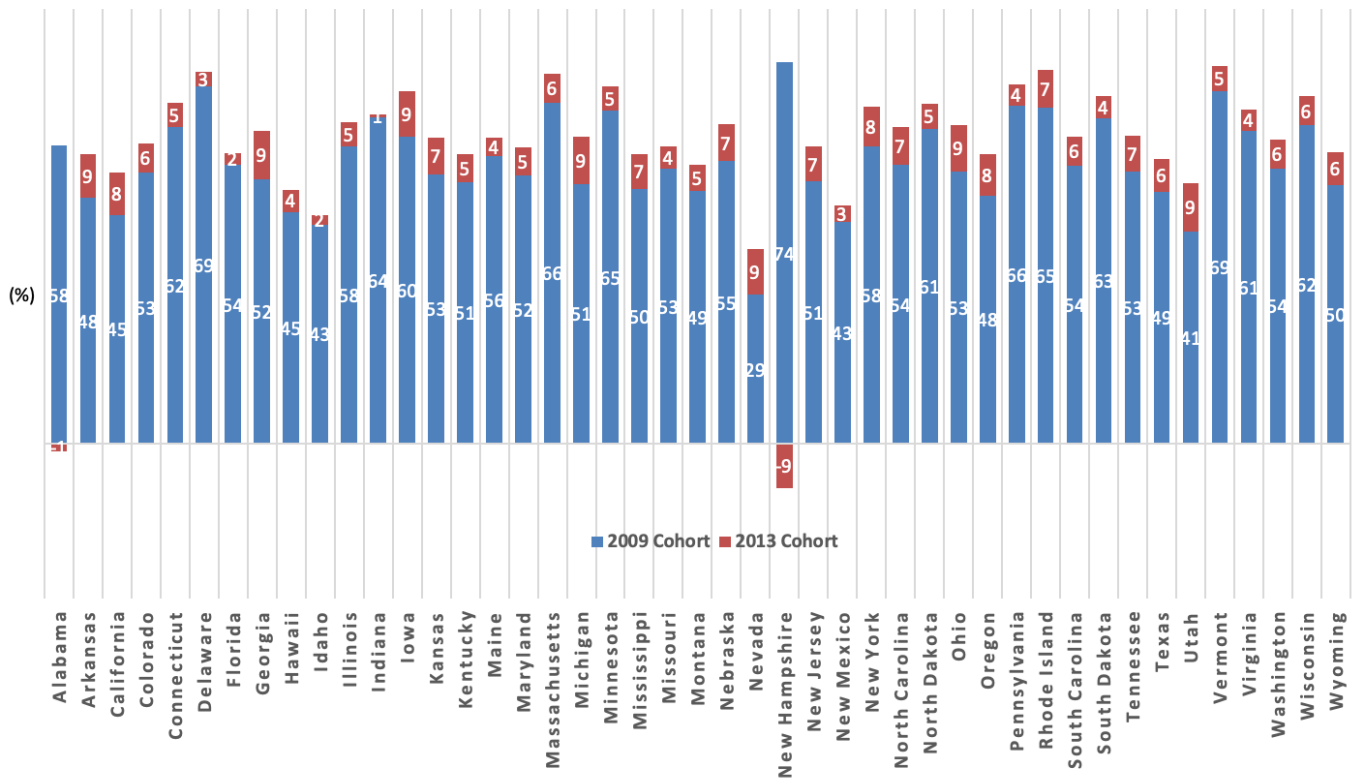
The states with the largest increases in completion rates over the last five cohort years include some of the most populous such as Ohio (53 to 62%), Georgia (52 to 61%), Michigan (51 to 60%), New York (58 to 66%), and California (45 to 53%), as well as Utah (41 to 51%), Iowa (60 to 69%), Nevada (29 to 38%), and North Carolina (54 to 62%).

### **While public college completion rates are up generally, those for community college starters appear to be gaining more ground.**

Based on change over the last year (that is, between the 2012 and 2013 cohorts), the six-year completion rate went up in thirty-seven states for public four-year starters, and in thirty-three states for community college starters (see **Table 2** in the [Appendix](#)). Twenty-seven states gained at least one percentage point in the community college starter completion rate and these increases surpassed those for public four-year starters in twenty-two states.

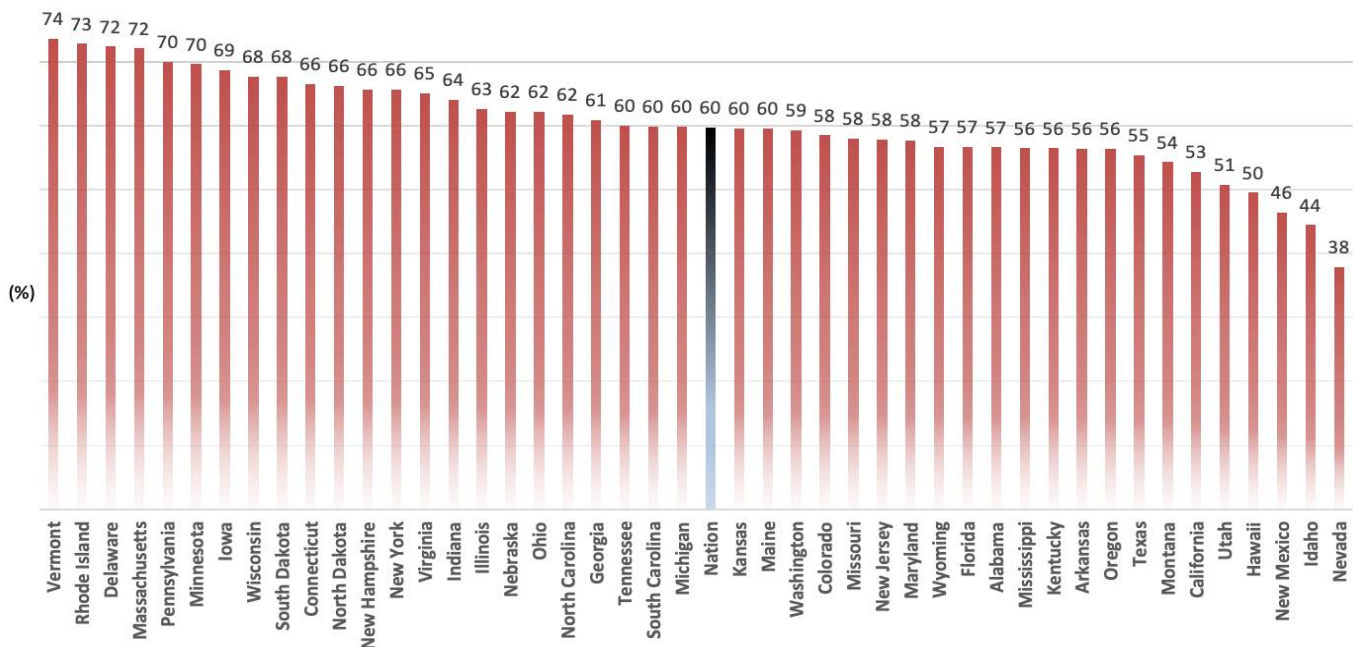
The completion rate for community college starters increased three percentage points or more in eight states including Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Washington, and Wyoming. In fact, the steepest increase was four percentage points in Oklahoma (34 to 38%) and Mississippi (46 to 50%). For public four-year starters, only three states, Nevada, New Mexico, and Ohio, made comparable gains.

Figure 1. Change in Overall Six-Year College Completion Rate by State



Data are not available for five states that have uneven historical data coverage, Alaska, Arizona, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. Changes between the two cohort years (2009 and 2013) are shown here. Data for all intervening years are available in Table 1 and trends over those years are similar.

Figure 2. Overall Six-Year College Completion Rate by State: 2013 Entering Cohort at All Institutions



Data are not available for five states that have uneven historical data coverage, Alaska, Arizona, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and West Virginia.

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However, changes in the community college completion rate vary more by state. Eight states saw a drop in community college completion rates over the last year and three of those declined more than two percentage points: South Dakota (65 to 61%), Montana (48 to 45%), and Maine (40% to 38%). This is contrasted with the public four-year rates, where there were declines in only eight states, all of which were less than one percentage point.

**In two states, both Hispanic and African American completion rates improved at higher rates than overall.**

State-level completion rates by race and ethnicity were first introduced last year for public four-year starters. Based on change over the last year, North Carolina and Texas saw both the Hispanic and the African American student completion rates rise at higher rates than overall (one percentage point on average).

North Carolina had a four-percentage point gain in the Hispanic completion rate, to 77 percent, and a two percentage-point increase in the African American completion rate, to 63 percent. Hispanic and African American students constitute twenty-seven percent of the fall 2013 beginning cohort in the state. In Texas, the completion rate for each group improved by nearly three-percentage points, to 49 percent for African Americans and 59 percent for Hispanics. Hispanics and African Americans combined make up about half (46%) of all first-time students enrolling in the fall of 2013 in Texas.

Among states that had notable one-year gains for African Americans or Hispanics are Florida (up 2 percentage points to 53% for Hispanics), Massachusetts (up 2 percentage points to 66% for African Americans), and New Jersey (up 3 percentage points to 66% for African Americans).

On the other hand, New York lost ground by almost three percentages in each of the Asian and the African American completion rates, and Pennsylvania had a four-percentage point loss in the Hispanic student completion rate over the last year.

**First-time beginning students at community colleges are becoming younger.**

Community college starters are becoming more traditional-aged. Eight states had more than a three-percentage point increase in the share of traditional-age students between the 2012 and 2013 beginning cohorts (Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, and Kansas). The top two states with large share increases are New Hampshire (69 to 74%) and Arizona (66 to 70%). Correspondingly, two states also saw decreases in the share

of adult students age 25 or over, 22 to 18% in Arizona and 17 to 14% in New Hampshire. For public four-year starters, however, the share of traditional-age students grew by three percentage points in only two states, Maryland (67 to 73%) and Oregon (81 to 88%).

In summary, the state-level completion rate trends over the 2009-2013 cohort years largely correspond to the patterns found in the national report. Most states saw steady, across-the-board gains in overall completion rates. And completion rate disparities among states narrowed, while nearly every state trended upward. Over the last cohort year, community college starters made stronger one-year gains than public four-year starters, and some states increased completion outcomes for racial/ethnic minorities at higher rates than overall.

These college completion rate gains in state contexts reinforce the findings of our national report. With better tracking and disaggregation of data increasingly available to state educational leaders and policy makers through the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, efforts to improve student success can benefit from more detailed and complete state-specific results. The Research Center publishes national and state completion reports every year. The next edition will be a combined national and state-level *Completing College 2020 Report*, scheduled for release in the fall of 2020.

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**Suggested Citation**

Huie, F., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (February 2020), *Completing College State Report* (Signature Report 18A), Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.