

ISSUE SUMMARY:

Regional Comprehensive Universities

The term regional comprehensive universities (RCUs) encompasses public four-year institutions who serve the “new majority” of students, enrolling a disproportionately higher number of students of color, of low-income backgrounds, first generation, Pell Grant recipients, community college transfers, working adults, and veterans compared with other public and private institutions.

70% of all undergraduates attend RCUs

Of the nearly 7 million undergraduate students enrolled at public four-year institutions, 70% attend RCUs.

The word “comprehensive” in RCUs embodies the evolution of these colleges and universities that began as teacher schools, or “normal schools,” in communities across the country that have evolved to meet the distinctive education and workforce needs of their individual regions. RCUs reconcile these needs by offering a wide array of academic programs predominantly at the bachelor’s and master’s degree levels; however, many also offer strong doctoral programs. Preparing tomorrow’s workforce, most students enrolled at RCUs originate from a 50-mile radius of the institution and often live, work, and remain within these regions upon graduation.

Recognized for their commitment to service and their focus on surrounding communities, RCUs serve as true engines of economic mobility for their students and broader regions.

RCUs lead on issues surrounding access, affordability, and value, providing some of the most significant returns on investment in higher education. Eight out of the top 10 institutions ranked highest on the Third Way’s recent [Economic Mobility Index](#) were RCUs with price-to-earnings premiums for low-income students at percentiles above 94%. RCUs receive a lower amount of federal and state funding per student full-time equivalent enrollment on average when compared with all other public four-year institutions.

There are 517 RCUs in the United States across 49 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories that collectively educate more than 4.9 million students.

Affordable

Undergraduates at RCUs were more likely to be Pell recipients, transfer students, and/or attend part time. On average, 38% of students at RCUs received Pell Grants and 25% attended part time. Overall, median debt was lower among dependent students at RCUs than non-RCUs. Among students at RCUs, the distribution of median debt was relatively the same across family income levels.

Accessible

More than one-third of the students in the entering classes at RCUs were transfer students (36%). Undergraduate students at RCUs were more than twice as likely to be 25 and older (19%), compared with students at non-RCUs (7%).

Equitable

At RCUs, 46% of undergraduate students were students of color, compared with 35% of undergraduate students at non-RCUs.

Educating the next generation.

In 2022, RCUs awarded 80% of all bachelor's degrees in education and 80% of all total degrees in education earned at public four-year institutions.

STUDENT OUTCOMES AT RCUs

67% of all bachelor's degrees

In 2022, RCUs awarded 67% of all bachelor's degrees and 68% of all master's degrees earned at public four-year institutions, respectively.

Top fields of study in the 2021–2022 academic year:

- Business/communications and social/behavioral sciences and human services for bachelor's degree recipients
- Business/communications and education for master's degree recipients
- STEM fields for doctoral degree recipients
- Health for professional practice degree recipients

RCUs AS MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS (MSIs)

RCUs are much more likely to be MSIs. In FY23, 177 RCUs met eligibility requirements to apply for federal designation and funding for at least one MSI type, compared with 19 non-RCUs. In 2021–2022, among all public four-year institutions, RCUs enrolled:

- 87% of all Black or African American undergraduate students
- 79% of all Hispanic undergraduate students
- 71% of all American Indian or Alaska Native undergraduate students
- 68% of all Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander undergraduate students
- 59% of all Asian undergraduate students

STUDENT DEBT AND COMPLETION OUTCOMES

The average in-state tuition and fees among RCUs in the 2021–2022 academic year was less than \$10K on average for in-state, full-time undergraduates at RCUs. In academic year 2020–21, 68% of RCUs had a net price below \$15,000, compared with just 36% of non-RCUs.

Pell Grant recipients may carry higher levels of total median debt than non-Pell recipients. However, due to overall affordability, Pell recipients at RCUs carry less median debt (43% under \$15,000 total) than Pell recipients at non-RCUs (36% under \$15,000 total).

Notably, median debt among dependent students (60% under \$15,000) at RCUs is lower than their non-RCU counterparts (42% under \$15,000).

RCUs tend to have a lower first- to second-year student retention rate and have a smaller four-year graduation rate when compared to other public four-year universities.

- On average, 71% of full-time students enrolled at RCUs returned the following fall. Students at non-RCUs had higher retention rates with 87% returning to campus. The overall 150% graduation rate at RCUs (50%) is lower than at non-RCUs (74%).
- These data are rooted in a deeper message—it is imperative to understand the socio-economic circumstances surrounding student stop-out to work toward greater retention.

Source: AASCU analysis of College Scorecard and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.