

RESEARCH BRIEF

Associate of Arts Transfer Pathways in Florida

Enrollment Trends, Student Characteristics,
and State Policy Implications

JUNE 2024



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Helios Education Foundation exists to support postsecondary attainment for all students, especially low-income and underrepresented communities, in Arizona and Florida. Driven by our fundamental beliefs of community, equity, investment, and partnership, Helios has invested about \$350 million in partnerships and initiatives focused on improving third-grade reading, college-going, and postsecondary attainment in the two states we served since 2006.

We take a multi-pronged approach—working across four domains, including performance-based community investments, systemic public policy efforts, research and data, and impact-driven communications—that together support the significant changes required to foster equitable progress across the education continuum.

The Center for Postsecondary Success at Florida State University

The mission of the Center for Postsecondary Success (CPS) is to provide support for, and foster collaboration among, those who are interested in conducting research on student success in postsecondary education, and to identify and evaluate institutional, state, and federal policies and programs that may serve to improve student success.





Authors

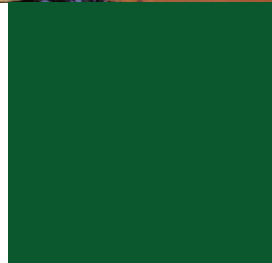
Toby Park-Gaghan, Ph.D., Florida State University
Christine Mokher, Ph.D., Florida State University
Kimberly Lent Morales, Helios Education Foundation
Paul Perrault, Ph.D., Helios Education Foundation

Contributors

Ian Hickox, Collaborative Communications

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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

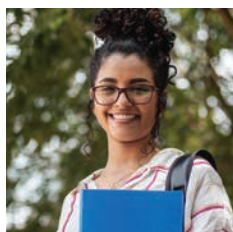
Why this Research Matters

Facilitating student transfers from two-year to four-year postsecondary institutions is a fundamental strategy by the state of Florida to increase college-going and credential attainment among high school graduates in the state. In fact, Florida is a leader in the U.S. when it comes to student transfers. But, as community college enrollments continue to decline nationwide and in the Florida College System, it is essential to understand transfer trends in Florida, and the pathways that students take, to inform efforts designed to increase enrollment, transfer, and, ultimately, college completion.

Research Questions

This research is intended to enhance understanding of the current trends in associate of arts (AA) pathways with the goal of informing policies that support student success in Florida. Our research questions include:

- 1 How have the two-year postsecondary outcomes of Florida high school graduates changed over the past 10 years?
- 2 What are the most common academic sequences taken by AA students in the Florida College System?
- 3 What observable characteristics distinguish students who enroll in a baccalaureate program after completing their AA degree from those who do not enroll in a baccalaureate program after completing their AA degree?



About the Data

To address research question one, the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) provided aggregated data on the number of high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education (within two years), the workforce, or unknown for 10 cohorts from Fall 2010 to Fall 2019. Using these data, we examine:

- Trends in postsecondary outcomes for all Florida public high school graduates
- Geographically disaggregated results (by Florida county)
- Results disaggregated by race/ethnicity and free-or-reduced price lunch status

To address research questions two and three, Florida's PK-20 Education Reporting and Accessibility (PERA) provided student-level records for two cohorts for first-time-in-college (FTIC) Florida College System enrollees who started in Fall 2010 or 2016. Using these data, we examine transfer and degree completion outcomes tracked for five years (until Spring of 2015 or 2021, respectively). Specifically, the outcomes examined include:

- Transfer, defined as whether a student ever enrolled in a bachelor's degree program
- Completion, based on the highest credential earned (none, certificate or other, AS, AA, or bachelor's degree).

Important Terms and Acronyms

AA starters: students who started their FCS enrollment in an associate degree program

AA completers: students who completed an AA degree

Acceleration credits: college credits earned from Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment courses

Completion: outcome defined in this study based on the highest credential earned

FCS: Florida College System

FETPIP: Florida Education Training and Training Information Program

FTIC: first-time-in-college

Low-income status: defined in this study as whether the student ever received free-or-reduced priced lunch in high school, or ever received any need-based financial aid in college

PERA: PK-20 Education Reporting and Accessibility

Transfer: outcome defined in this study as whether a student ever enrolled in a bachelor's degree program

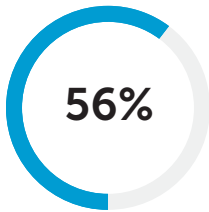
SUS: State University System



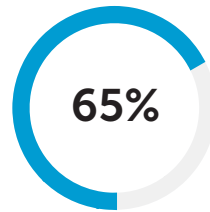
KEY FINDINGS

At a Glance: Key Findings

Enrollment rates in FCS institutions have declined among recent high school graduates over the past decade, while enrollment rates in the SUS have remained constant.





56% of the high school class of 2019 enrolled in a Florida postsecondary institution directly after graduation.





Transfer rates among students who completed AA degrees have remained relatively constant over time, at around 65 percent.

- ▼ High school graduate enrollment in FCS institutions has declined 8 percentage points from 38 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2019, while SUS enrollment rates have remained nearly unchanged over the past decade.
- ▼ Two-year postsecondary enrollment rates have declined 8 percentage points from 64 percent in 2010 to 56 percent in 2019 as more high school graduates are going directly into the workforce.

 Among students who do enroll in FCS institutions, both transfer and credential completion rates have increased over time.

 There have been gains in success among all student subgroups (race/ethnicity, low-income status, and gender), but substantial gaps have widened over time among Black and low-income students.

 High school characteristics played a relatively small role in transfer rates among AA completers, except that there are higher transfer rates among students who completed acceleration credits in high school.

 College behaviors played an important role, with AA students being more likely to transfer if they completed their AA degree more quickly, earned credit for a higher proportion of credits attempts, did not take developmental education courses, and passed gateway math and English courses in the first year.



Introduction

One of the primary functions of community colleges is to support students in transferring from associate to bachelor's degree programs. In 2014, nearly 80 percent of first-time community college students across the country expressed an intent to complete a bachelor's degree or higher. But, tellingly, only 31 percent of students who enrolled in a community college in 2014 had transferred to a four-year university within six years, according to 2017 data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Fewer than half of these transfer students (47 percent) had completed a bachelor's degree within six years of initial postsecondary enrollment.

State Policies Help Position Florida Among the Top Five Transfer States

Florida is a national leader in student transfers from two-year institutions to four-year institutions. This is attributable, in part, to the state's implementation of several policies that facilitate student transfers. These include the adoption of:

- A statewide 2+2 articulation agreement;
- A common statewide course numbering system; and
- Common prerequisites for upper-division programs.

As shown in National Student Clearinghouse data from 2017 (nscresearchcenter.org/tracking-transfer), Florida ranks in the top five nationally with respect to the number of transfer students who start at a community college and complete a bachelor's degree within six years.

Declining Postsecondary Enrollments Represent a Challenge for Florida

Despite Florida's comparatively strong and stable transfer rates, AA program enrollment declines have manifested as more and more high school graduates enter the workforce directly after high school. From 2010 to 2019, overall postsecondary enrollments declined by eight percentage points in Florida, from 64 percent in 2010 to 56 percent in 2019.

These declines are associated with lower enrollment rates at FCS institutions. Whereas enrollment at SUS institutions has remained relatively consistent, high school graduate enrollment at FCS institutions declined eight percentage points from 38 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2019.

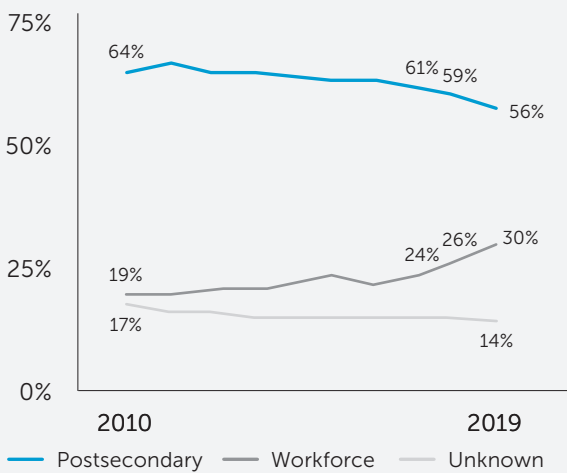
Notably, the beginning of this 10-year trend corresponds with the Great Recession while the period at the end of the trend occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the 10-year trends in postsecondary enrollment rates varied across the state, with some counties experiencing gains up to four percentage points and others experiencing losses of 20 percentage points or more.

Closer Look: 10-Year Postsecondary Enrollment Trends in Florida

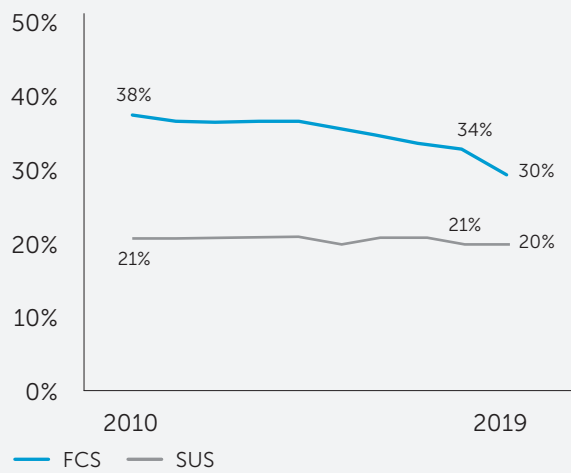
As noted previously, high school graduate enrollment in FCS institutions declined eight percentage points from 2010 to 2019. For the last pre-COVID cohort, in 2016, there was a smaller decline of four percentage points relative to the 2010 cohort. In both the pre- and post-COVID cohorts, enrollment in SUS institutions has remained relatively constant over time. This is a departure from national trends that show enrollment in both two-year and four-year public colleges declined during COVID, with slightly greater declines in the two-year college sector.

Three counties—Dixie, Sumter, and Osceola—saw small gains in postsecondary enrollment rates of three to four percentage points. In all other counties, postsecondary enrollment rates remained constant or declined over time. Levy, Gadsden, and Glades had the greatest postsecondary declines in postsecondary enrollment rates at 20 percentage points or more.

Two-Year Postsecondary Outcomes of Public High School Graduates, 2010 to 2019 Cohorts

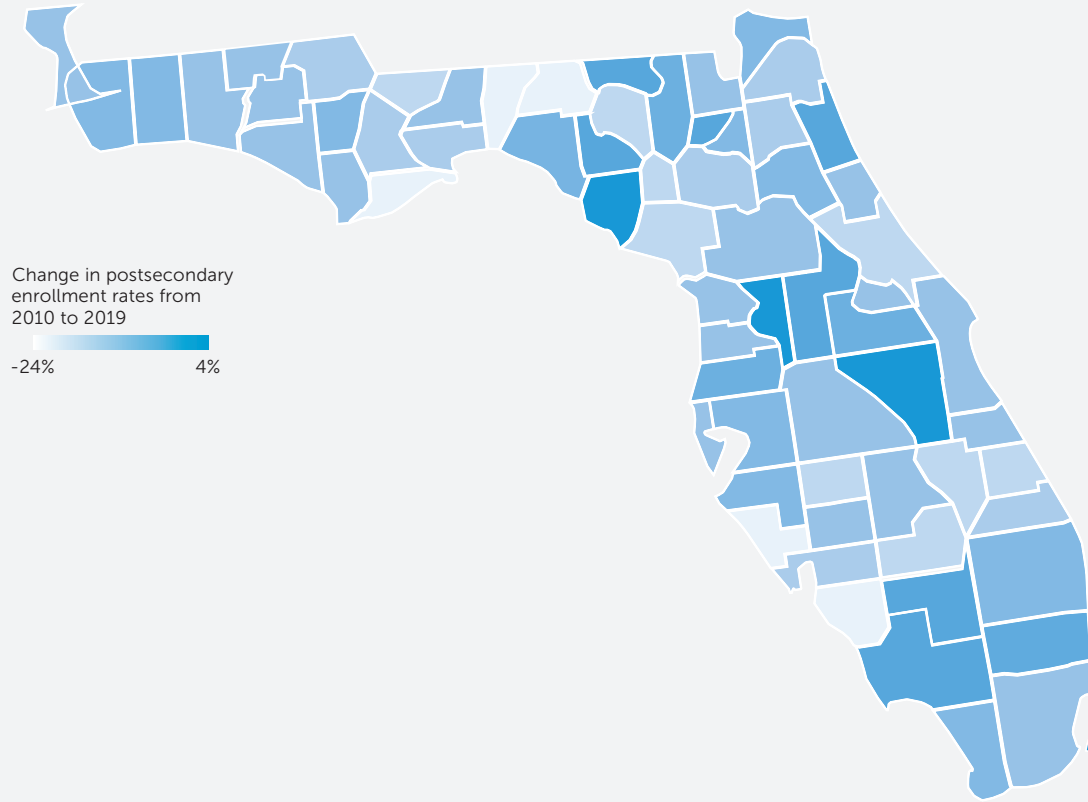


Two-Year Enrollment Rates in FCS and SUS Institutions Among Public High School Graduates, 2010 to 2019 Cohorts





Two-Year Postsecondary Outcomes of Public High School Graduates, by County, 2010 to 2019 Cohorts



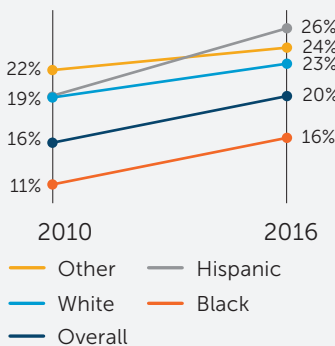
Understanding the Academic Sequences FCS Students Follow

To better understand differences in transfer student academic outcomes, the analysis included a comparison of students who enrolled as first-time-in-college students at an FCS institution in the fall of 2010 and fall of 2016 and tracked their outcomes for five years. During this time, overall FCS enrollment declined by five percent (from 71,515 to 68,111). Notably, this overall pattern is influenced by variation in enrollment increases and decreases by program type. In particular, enrollments increased by eight percentage points for AA programs and declined seven percentage points in certificate/other programs.

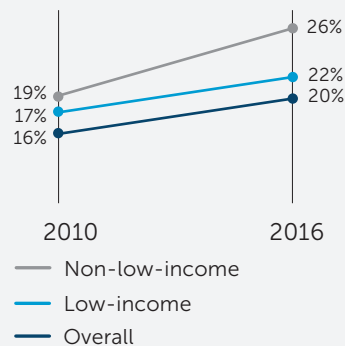
While overall enrollment rates at FCS institutions declined, transfer rates increased during this same period, both overall and for all student subgroups. Overall transfer rates increased by four percentage points, while Hispanic and non-low-income students saw the greatest gains with seven percentage point increases, respectively. Both groups saw the greatest transfer rate gains.

Transfer Rates by Race Ethnicity and Income Status, 2010 and 2016 Cohorts

By Race/Ethnicity



By Income Status





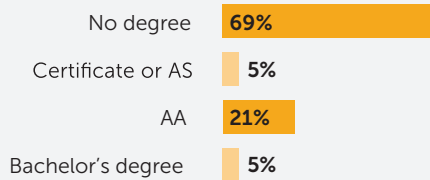
Similarly, bachelor's degree completion rates (within 5 years) increased from five percent in the 2010 cohort to eight percent in the 2016 cohort. The greatest gains (seven percentage point increase) were among AA completers, from 17 percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2016. However, bachelor's degree completion rates for all students who started in an AA program remain low (less than 10 percent). As with transfer outcomes, the greatest gains were for Hispanic students (five percentage point increase) and for non-low-income students (five percentage point increase).

Among all students who started in AS or AA programs in 2010, 69 percent completed no credential. The most common credential was an AA degree (21 percent). Only five percent of students completed bachelor's degrees.

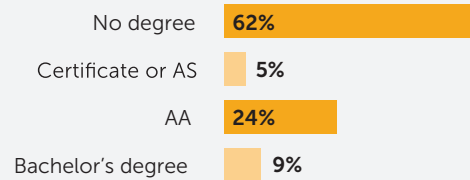
In 2016, the percent of all students in AS or AA programs completing no credential declined seven percentage points to 62 percent. There were corresponding gains in both AA degree attainment (from 21 percent to 24 percent) and bachelor's degree attainment (from five percent to nine percent).

AS and AA Student Attainment Outcomes for 2010 and 2016 Cohorts

2010 (total students = 55,973)



2016 (total students = 54,151)



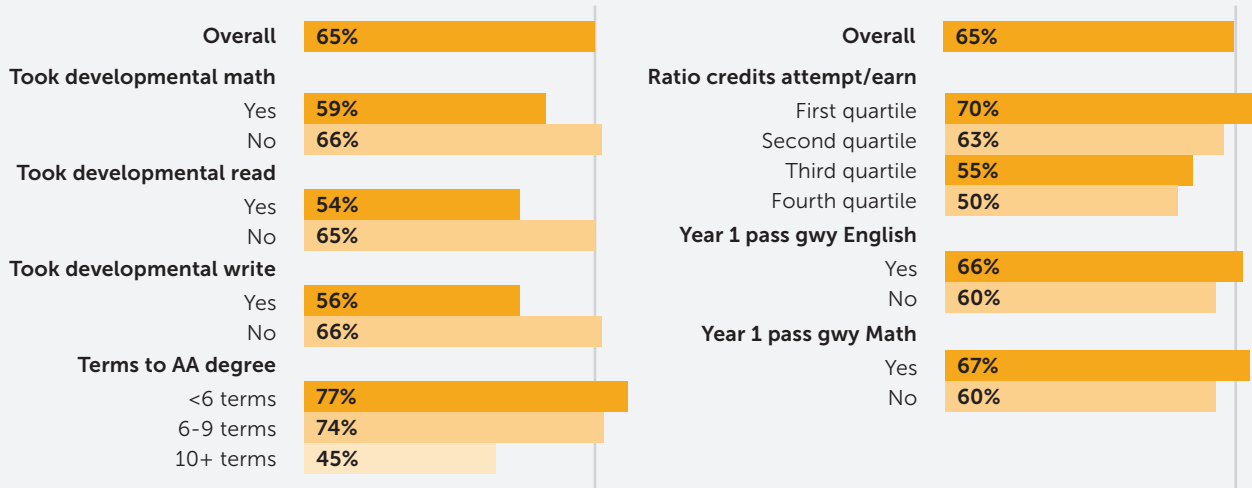
The Characteristics that Distinguish Students Who Enroll in Bachelor’s Degree Programs

In both the 2010 and 2016 cohorts, approximately two-thirds of AA completers transfer to a bachelor’s degree program. Relatively few differences in high school characteristics distinguished transfer students from those who did not transfer. Importantly, though, students who completed accelerated coursework in high school were more likely to transfer to a bachelor’s program than those who did not (73 percent versus 63 percent).

More substantial differences in transfer rates appear when observing college behaviors of students. The most important factor was the number of terms it took students to earn an AA degree. The transfer rate was 77 percent for students who completed the AA in less than six terms, compared to only 45 percent for students who took 10 or more terms. Predictably, students were also more likely to transfer if they earned credit for a higher proportion of credits attempted.

Similarly, higher transfer rates were observed among students who completed gateway math or English courses in the first year, and lower transfer rates were observed among students who took developmental education courses.

Transfer Rates Among Students Who Completed AA Degrees, by College Behaviors





What Florida Can Do

As previously noted, Florida already has policies in place that bolster the transfer component of FCS institutions and that make it easier for students to efficiently make the move from a two-year to a four-year institution. Our state can build on this strong foundation by working to increase the number of high school graduates in Florida who enroll at FCS institutions. Investments to increase FCS enrollment would not only increase college-going throughout the state, but it would also expand the pipeline of students in a position to capitalize on the exceptional value that transfer represents.

Additionally, Florida can consider ways to expand access to accelerated coursework in high school, such as AP, IB, and dual enrollment classes. Participation in accelerated coursework has been shown to increase the likelihood that students will enroll in a postsecondary institution after high school, as well as the likelihood that they will succeed in their program of study.

Relatedly, Florida can incentivize postsecondary academic sequences that contribute to continuous enrollment. Breaks in postsecondary enrollment represent a significant impediment to long-term persistence and degree completion. Course sequences that encourage and enable students to maintain their enrollment—and their momentum—can help to them stay on the pathway and complete their degree even when challenges inevitably arise.



ARIZONA

4747 N 32nd St.
Phoenix, AZ 85018
602-636-1850

FLORIDA

101 E Kennedy Blvd.
Suite 2050
Tampa, FL 33602
813-387-0221