



Strong Starts Matter: First-generation Outcomes at Minority-Serving Institutions

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Introduction

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) play a critical role in advancing equity in higher education by enrolling and educating a disproportionate share of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. These institutions are also central to the success of first-generation college students, who often face systemic barriers to persistence and completion, including academic underpreparedness, financial insecurity, and limited access to institutional support.

Understanding how first-generation students fare at MSIs—particularly during the pivotal first year—provides insight into how institutions support early momentum, persistence, and long-term success. Early indicators such as enrollment, credit completion, and first-to-second-year retention are especially important, as they capture whether students are successfully navigating the most vulnerable phase of the college experience.

Despite the importance of MSIs in the postsecondary landscape, campus-level evidence on first-generation student outcomes is often fragmented or difficult to interpret across institution types. Disaggregated, multi-year analyses are essential for distinguishing short-term fluctuations from sustained progress and for identifying patterns that hold across institutional contexts.

The FirstGen Forward Network is uniquely positioned to contribute to this understanding. As a national community committed to improving first-generation student outcomes, the Network leverages shared data, evidence-based practices, and cross-institutional learning to support continuous improvement. The findings below draw on aggregate Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) data and highlight both the scale of first-generation enrollment at MSIs and the strength of early student outcomes across multiple institutional settings.

Prevalence and Types of MSIs in the Network

Out of 469 institutions in the Network, 54% hold a federal MSI designation, reflecting the Network's strong alignment with institutions that serve racially and ethnically underrepresented students.

Among MSI-designated institutions:

- 31% are Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (eHSIs)
- 27% are Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)
- 37% are Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)
- 4% are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
- 1% are Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)
- 1% are Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTIs)

This mix reflects both long-established and emerging MSIs, illustrating the evolving institutional landscape supporting first-generation students.

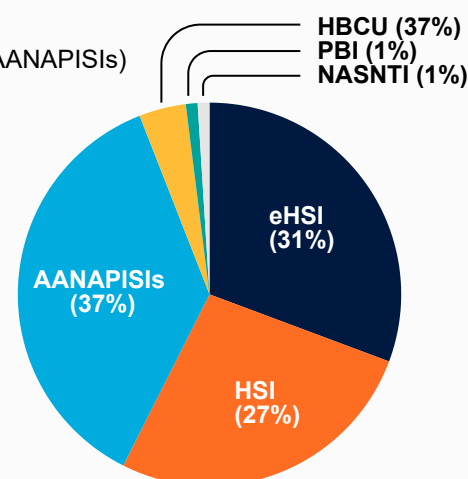
Prevalence and Types of MSIs in the Network

The Network includes a diverse cross-section of institutions:

51% public, four-year or above

27% private, not-for-profit, four-year or above

8% public, two-year



To ensure consistency and avoid redaction in disaggregated analyses, this brief focuses on four-year institutions.

Data and Methodology

All findings are based on aggregate data reported through the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP), a National Student Clearinghouse service that provides standardized metrics for student success.

These data:

- Capture enrollment, retention, completion, and credit progress;
- Are aggregated at the institutional and cohort level; and
- Allow for cross-institutional benchmarking within the FirstGen Forward Network.

All results focus on first-generation students enrolled at Network Leader or Champion institutions that also hold an MSI designation. Findings are disaggregated by institutional control (public vs. private) to provide contextual insight.

Because data are aggregated, results should be interpreted as descriptive of system-level patterns rather than causal.

Strong Starts: Early Momentum Indicators

This brief centers on three key components of a “strong start”:

- First-year Credit Completion Ratio (CCR);
- First-year enrollment; and
- First-to-second-year retention.

Together, these metrics provide a comprehensive view of whether students are successfully entering, progressing through, and continuing beyond their first year.

First-Year Credit Completion Ratio (CCR)

The First-Year Credit Completion Ratio (CCR) measures the proportion of attempted credits successfully completed during the first year—an early indicator strongly associated with persistence and completion.

Private, Not-for-Profit, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- CCR at private, four-year MSIs has remained consistently strong, with a five-year average of 93%, reaching a new five-year high of 95% in the 2024–25 cohort.
- From the 2020–21 through 2024–25 cohorts, CCR increased by 1.6 percentage points, rebounding quickly after a modest dip in the 2021–22 cohort. This pattern suggests sustained academic momentum for first-generation students despite pandemic-related disruptions.

Public, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- At public four-year MSIs, CCR has increased in each of the last two years, culminating in a five-year high of 82% in the 2024–25 cohort.
- Across the full five-year period, CCR improved by 2.3 percentage points, with performance remaining near 80% even during the most pandemic-affected years—indicating relative stability in first-year academic progress.

First-Year Enrollment

Enrollment trends provide critical context for understanding capacity, access, and institutional commitment to first-generation students within MSIs.

Private, Not-for-Profit, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- First-generation enrollment at private MSI institutions remained resilient, ranging from approximately 500 to 700 students across cohorts (five-year average = 571).
- Notably, the 2022–23 cohort experienced a 15% year-over-year increase (from 503 to 580 students), demonstrating a strong rebound following early-pandemic enrollment softness.

Public, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- Public four-year MSIs showed consistent and sustained enrollment growth. First-generation enrollment increased every year, from 1,170 students in the 2020–21 cohort to a five-year high of 1,497 in 2024–25.
- This represents a net gain of 327 students (+28%), with a five-year average enrollment of approximately 1,311, signaling clear and measurable expansion in access for first-generation learners.

First-to-Second-Year Retention

First-to-second-year retention is a critical indicator of early student success and institutional support effectiveness.

Private, Not-for-Profit, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- Retention among first-generation students at private MSIs averaged 87% across the five most recent cohorts, reaching a five-year high of 92% in the 2022–23 cohort.
- From the 2018–19 to 2022–23 cohorts, retention improved by 7.7 percentage points, with all reported years meeting or exceeding 84%, reflecting sustained gains over time.

Public, Four-Year or Above MSIs

- Retention at public four-year MSIs remained stable at approximately 79% across the five-year window, staying within a narrow range despite pandemic and post-pandemic disruptions.
- While slightly lower than earlier peaks (e.g., 81.8% in the 2019–20 cohort), this consistency provides a solid foundation for future improvement.

Equity and Comparative Outcomes

Across MSI institutions:

- CCR gaps between first-generation and continuing-generation students are relatively small.
- First-generation enrollment remains strong and, in many cases, growing.
- Retention gaps are narrow (typically 2–4 percentage points).

These findings suggest that MSIs are effectively mitigating traditional disparities during the critical first year.

Conclusion

The findings in this brief demonstrate that MSIs within the FirstGen Forward Network are not only advancing access for first-generation students but also supporting strong early academic momentum. These outcomes are especially significant because early indicators—enrollment, credit completion, and retention—serve as powerful predictors of long-term degree attainment.

Research consistently shows that students who successfully complete a high proportion of their attempted credits in the first year and persist into their second year are substantially more likely to graduate. Analyses from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center identify first-year academic performance, including credit completion and second-year enrollment, as among the strongest predictors of timely degree completion.,

Credit completion plays a particularly important role in this trajectory. Students who accumulate credits efficiently early in their academic careers are far more likely to persist and complete, while those who fall behind in the first year face significantly reduced completion probabilities. Retention from the first to second year represents another critical inflection point, reflecting both academic progress and the effectiveness of institutional support during the transition into college.

Taken together, these findings reinforce that a “strong start” is not simply an early milestone—it is a foundation for long-term success. Early success across enrollment, retention, and credit completion reflects successful navigation of the most vulnerable phase of the student journey and signals a significantly higher likelihood of eventual degree attainment.³

In this context, the strong outcomes observed across MSIs—high and improving CCR, stable retention, and sustained enrollment growth—should be understood not only as indicators of early success, but as leading signals of future completion. These results underscore the critical role MSIs play in building equitable pathways to degree attainment for first-generation students and highlight the importance of continued investment in early momentum strategies as a driver of long-term student success.

¹Cline, J. W., & Adilov, N. (2026). College retention, graduation rates, and enrollment. *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 54, 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11293-026-09850-w>

²Nguyen, D. H. (2024, March 25). The number of credits counts: Understanding the path to degree completion. *Higher Education Today*.

³Gardner, A., Ibrahim, M., Karamarkovich, S., Holsapple, M., and Shapiro, D. (December 2024), PDP Insights: Early Indicators of Timely Completers, Herndon, VA: *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*.