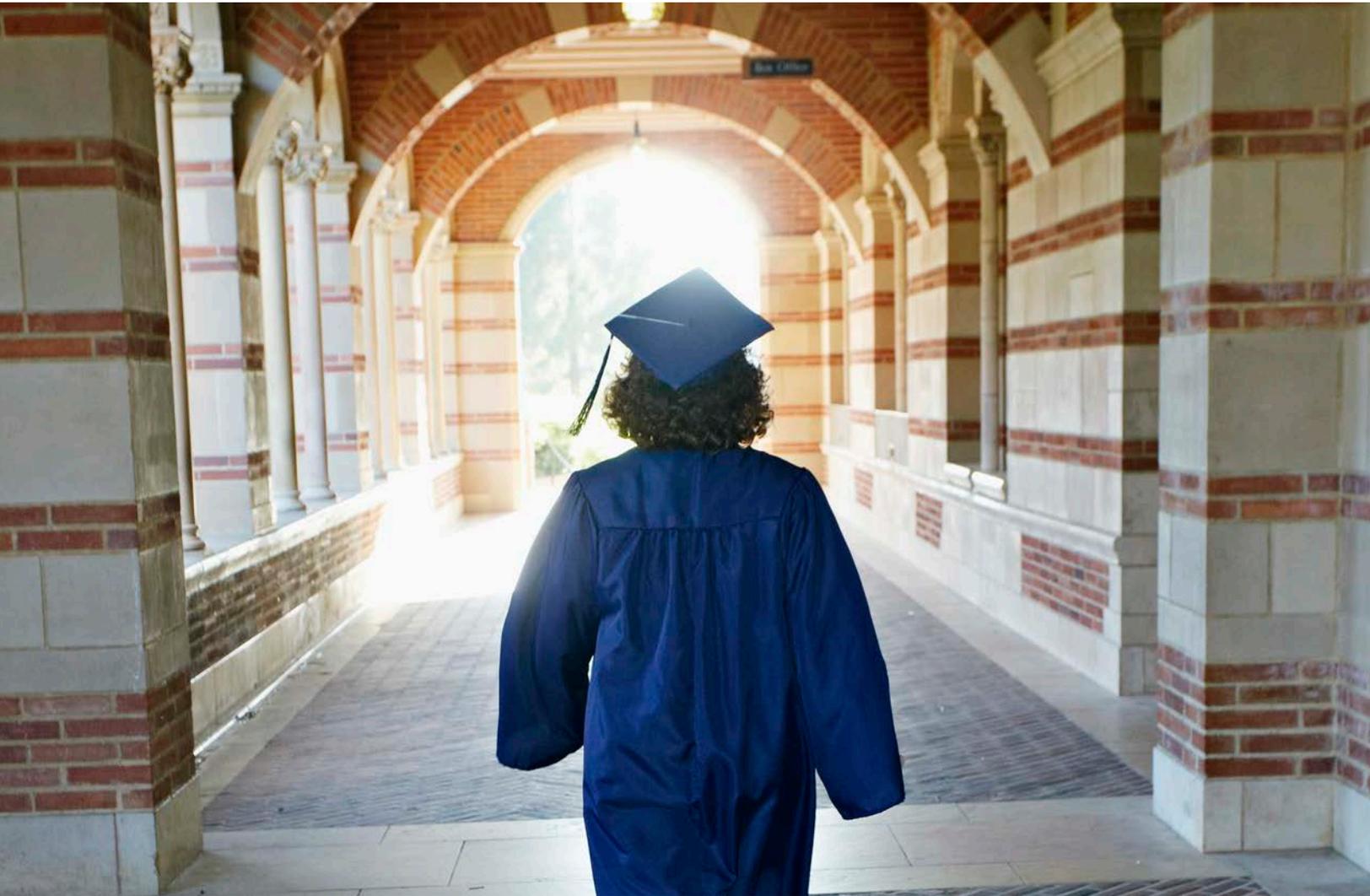


Undergraduate Degree Earners



HIGHLIGHTS

The steady growth in undergraduate credential earners has come to a standstill for the first time in the eight years since we started tracking these data. The latest data reveals that the 3.7 million new graduates in the 2019-20 academic year represent no growth from the previous year.

Although total graduate numbers remained the same, first-time graduates decreased (-1%) while non-first-time completers, those earning stacked credentials, continued to increase (2.7%).

Associate degree and certificate recipients in late spring 2020 account for much of the loss in first-time graduates, reflecting the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on community college students.

However, non-first-time graduates earning sub-baccalaureate credentials continued to grow.

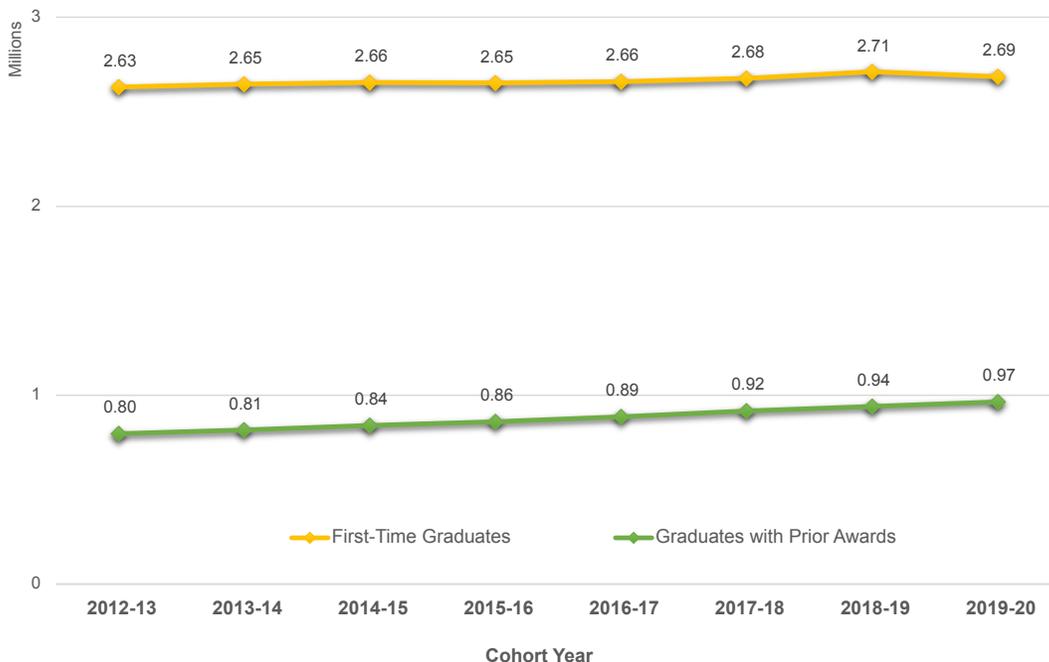
The Undergraduate Degree Earners report series, published annually, provides demographic and educational profile data for all students graduating with an undergraduate credential each year. Undergraduate credentials may include associate and bachelor's degrees and certificates.

In the current report, we profile graduates in the 2019-20 academic year, with a focus on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and changes in demographics and education credentials received over the last eight academic years, since 2012-13. The [Appendix](#) provides state-level and regional trends, in addition to the national graduate profiles by age and type of credential received.

The upward trend in the total number of undergraduate credential earners has stalled in 2020, remaining at 3.7 million due to a decline in first-time graduates.

The total number of undergraduate credential earners in 2019-20 remained the same as the prior year, halting its steady annual rise for the first time since 2012-13 when tracking started. While graduates with prior awards maintained an upward trend each year, first-time undergraduate credential earners declined by 26,000 students, or 1 percent, in 2020 from the previous year, following a 1.3 percent growth (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Overall Undergraduate Credential Earners



In fact, these two groups of graduates have increasingly diverged over the last eight years. Graduates with prior awards grew by nearly 170,000 students, far outnumbering first-time graduates who only increased by 53,000 students over this period. The share of stacked credential earners grew from 23 percent in 2012 to 26 percent in 2019, while the share of first-time graduates shrank (Figure 2). Overall, though, first-time completers are still the largest share, with three out of every four graduates earning their first undergraduate credential (Figure 3).

Our latest degree awards data demonstrates that COVID-related disruptions have had differential impacts between first-time and non-first-time graduates, which further revealed the disparity by the educational pathways they traversed.

Figure 2. Degree Earners by Type of Prior and Current Awards

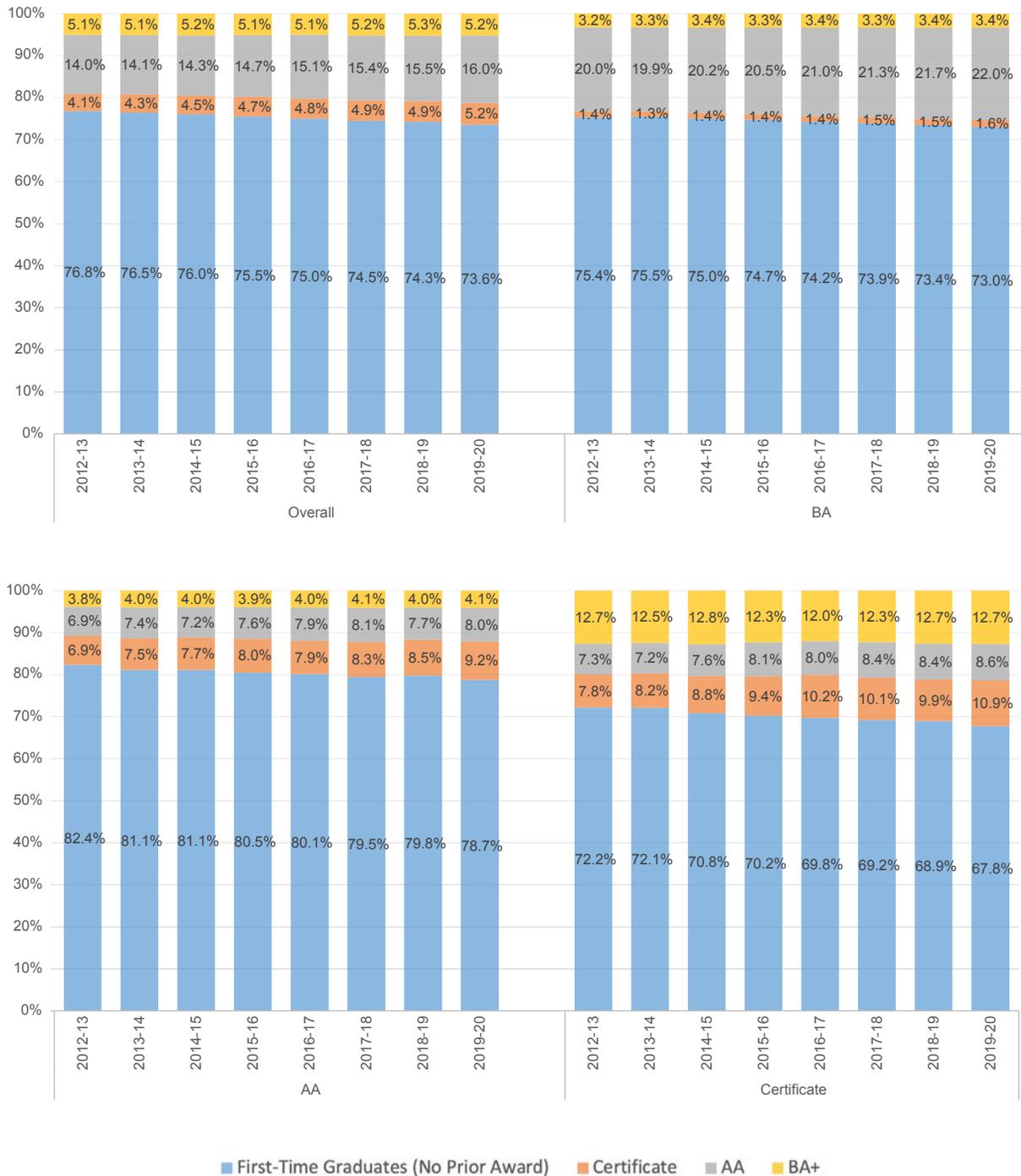


Figure 3. 2019-20 College Graduate Profile (N=3.7M)

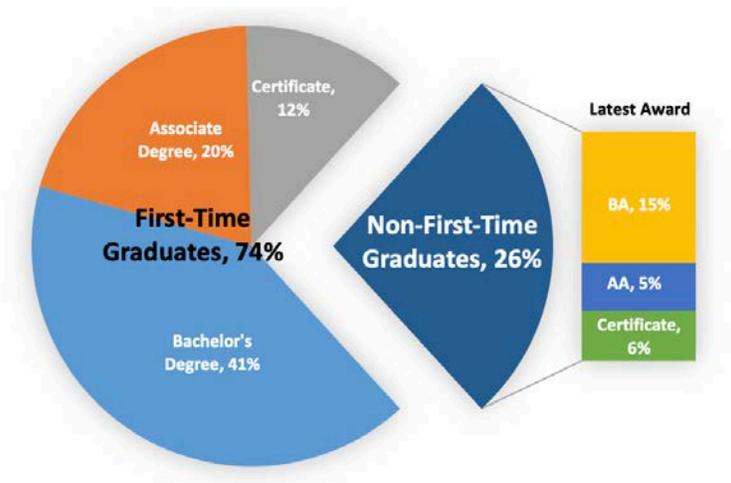
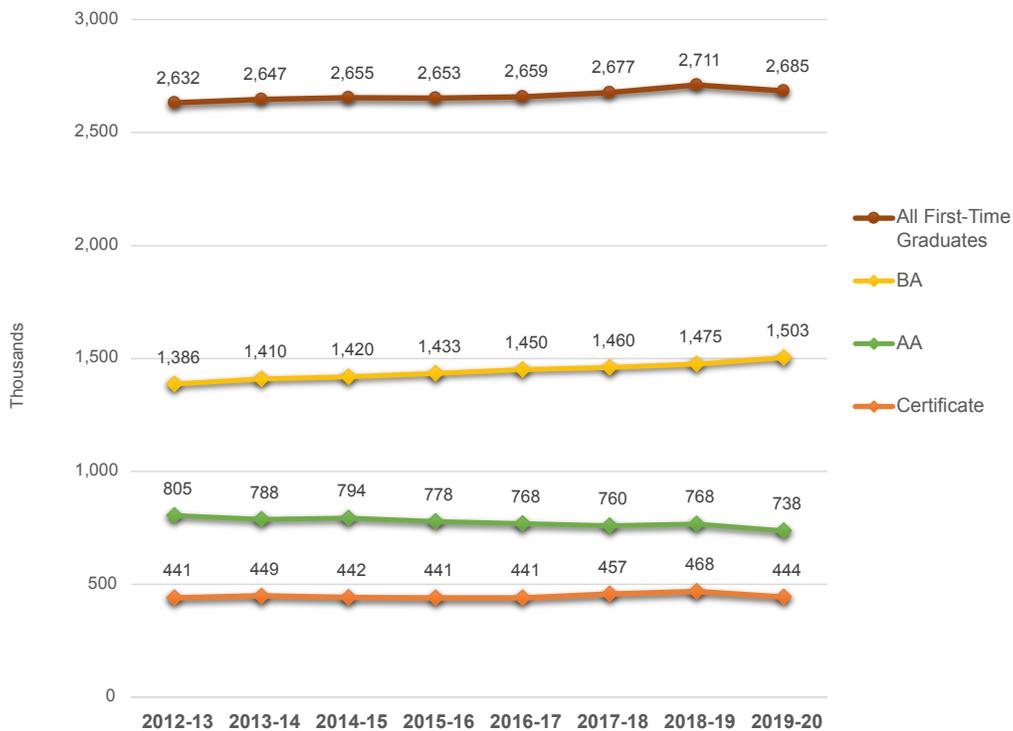


Figure 4. First-Time Graduates by Type of Award



Sharp contrasts emerged during the pandemic between first-time and non-first-time graduates, further widening the disparity.

Much of the decline in overall first-time graduates can be explained by associate degree and certificate earners, whose numbers dropped sharply at a time when the pandemic began shutting down the US economy and higher education institutions. Declines among first-time associate degree and certificate earners fell 3.9 percent and 5.0 percent, respectively, undoing previous improvements (1.0% and 2.3% increases, respectively, as shown in **Figure 4**). In fact, the number of first-time associate degree earners is now at the lowest level since 2012-2013 when we started tracking these data. However, the 1 percent decline in overall first-time earners is contrasted with the continued increase in non-first-time graduates, those earning stacked credentials (up 2.7% from the preceding year).

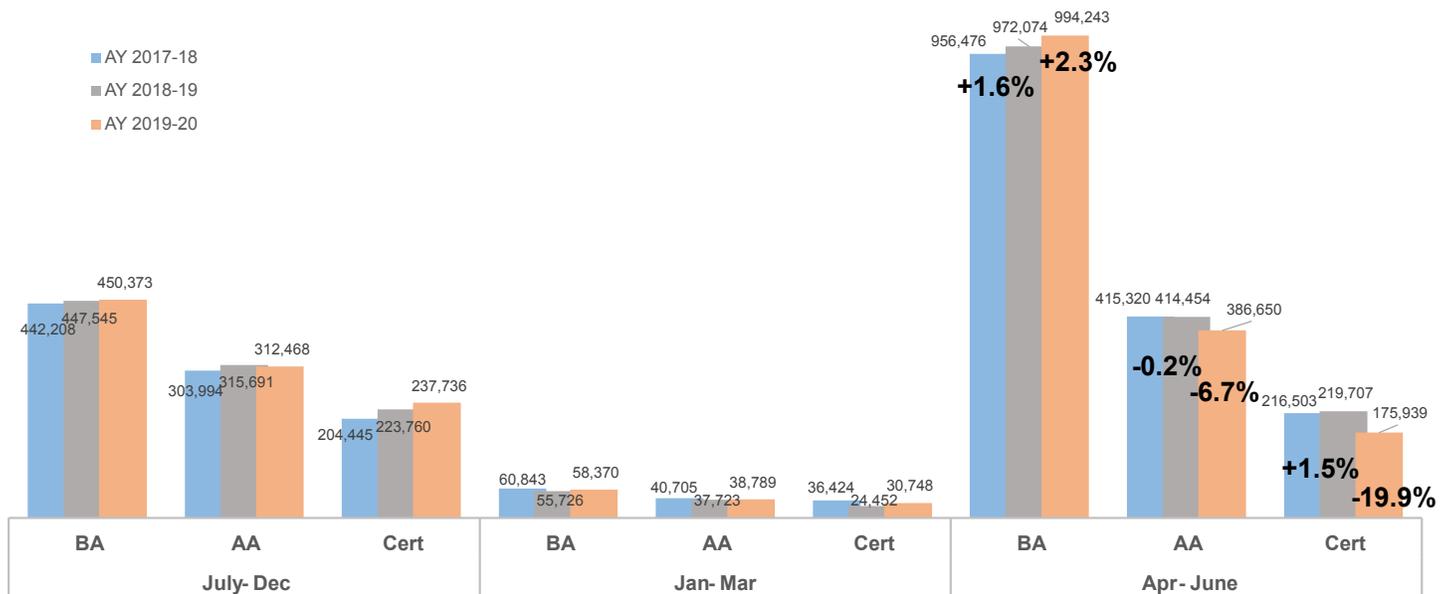
COVID-19 disproportionately affected first-time graduates who earned a sub-baccalaureate credential.

In the year prior to the pandemic, first-time associate degree earners were already on the path of decline, but COVID-19 appears to have accelerated the decline. After the campus shut-downs began in March 2020, their numbers dropped drastically compared to the pre-pandemic rate, going from a 0.2 percent year-over-year decline between April and June 2019, to a 6.7 percent drop during the same months in 2020 (**Figure 5**). As context, these three months typically account for more than half of all first-time associate degree earners each year. In 2020, it was during these months that over 90 percent of the decline occurred.

More evidently, first-time certificate earners fell almost 20 percent within just a few months after campus shut-downs, compared to a 1.5 percent growth between April and June 2019. Unlike associate degrees, certificates are awarded throughout the year, where half of all first-time certificate earners complete their credential between July through December. Before starting to drop in April 2020, their numbers were steadily growing year over year, up 6.2 percent between July and December in 2019, compared to a 9.4 percent increase over the same period in 2018.

First-time bachelor's degree earners, in contrast, increased 1.9 percent in 2019-20, or nearly 28,000 more graduates, over the previous year, continuing a steady growth trend. Notably, their numbers grew more in the early months of the pandemic than they did during the same months in the previous year (2.3% and 1.6%, respectively). Out of the additional 28,000 first-time bachelor's degree earners in 2019-20, 80 percent of their degrees were received between April and June, a period when most bachelor's degrees are typically received.

Figure 5. First-Time Graduates by Type of Award and Award Month



First-time bachelor's degree earners increased only among traditional-aged students.

Decreases in the number of first-time credential earners were observed across all age groups, regardless of the award earned, with the single exception of bachelor's degree earners under age 25 (Figure 6). The number of traditional-aged bachelor's degree recipients increased 2.9 percent, or by 35,000 students, while their older counterparts (age 25+) continued to decline (-2.8%). As a result, overall traditional-aged first-time graduates increased half a percent from the previous year further widening the gap from adult students (Figure 7).

For first-time associate degree and certificate earners, large declines among 25- to 29-year-olds were found. Associate degree earners ages 25-29 dropped more than three times the previous rate to a 7 percent decline. The number of traditional-aged associate degree earners trended downwards for the first time since 2012 (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Percent Change from 2018 to 2019 in First-Time Graduates by Type of Award and Age at Graduation

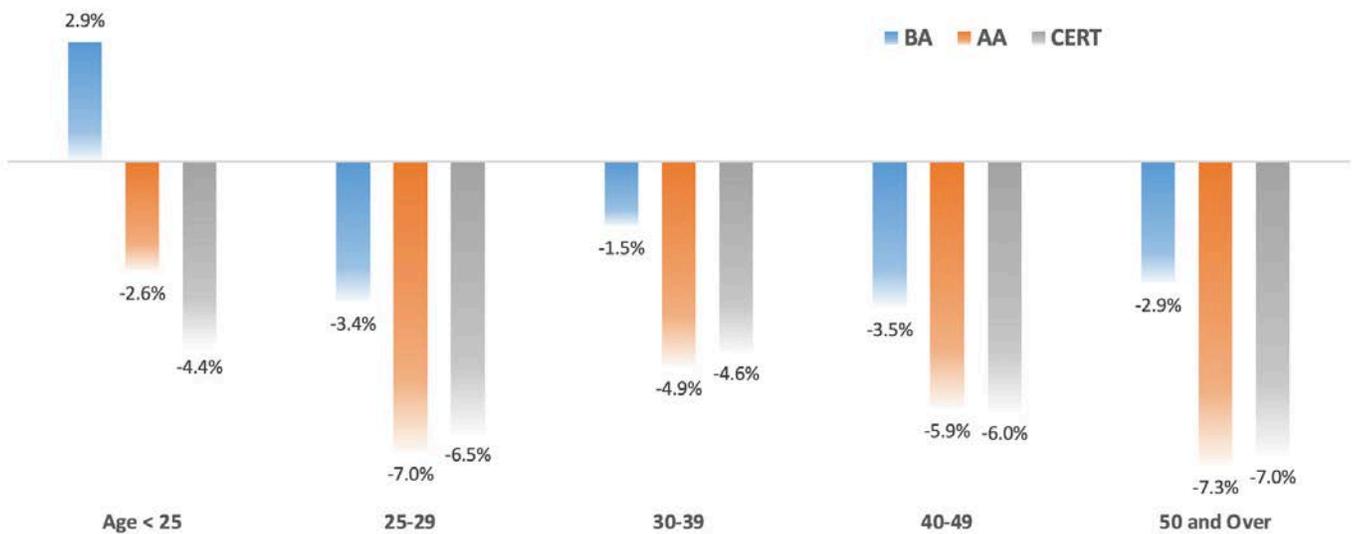
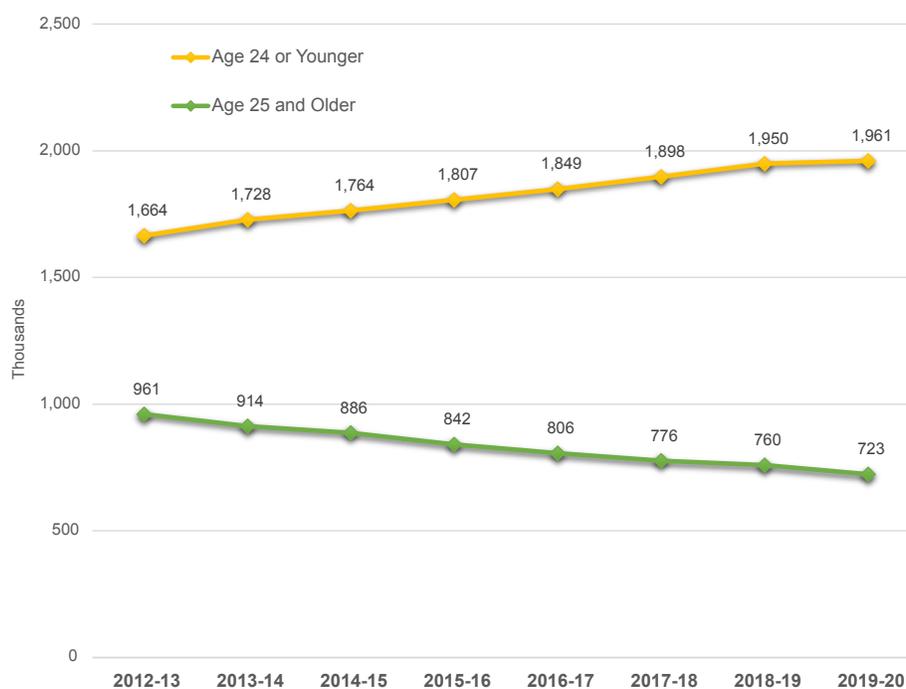


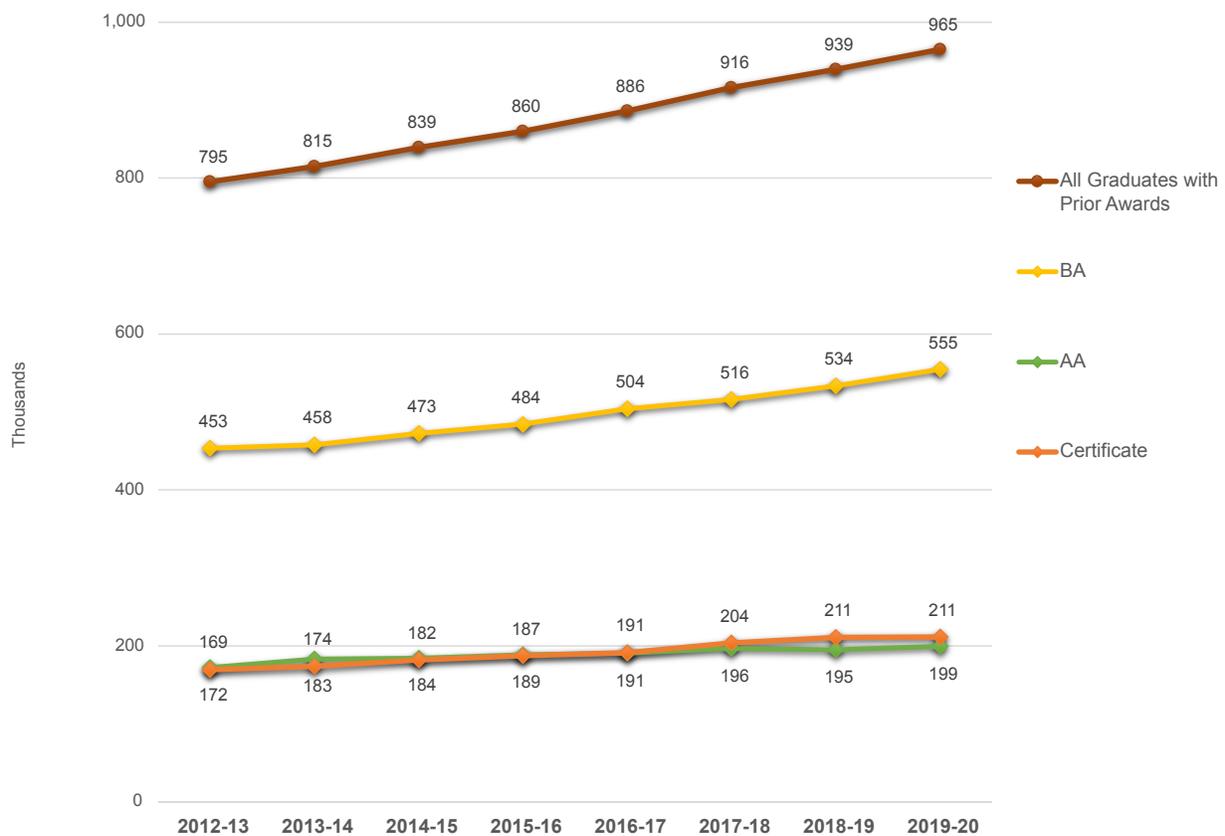
Figure 7. First-Time Graduates by Age at Graduation



Stacked credentials continue to gain among all undergraduate credential pathways, especially the community college transfer pathways to the bachelor's degree.

Bachelor's degree earners with prior associate degrees drove the 2.7 percent overall growth in graduates with stacked credentials (**Figure 8**). These students, who followed the community college transfer pathway to a bachelor's degree, increased 3.9 percent in 2019-20, more than 17,000 graduates, compared to the prior year (see appendix, Table 1). They represent a growing share of all bachelor's degree recipients (22%) whereas the share who are first-time graduates fell to 73 percent. Associate degree earners with stacked credentials, declined slightly by 0.8 percent between 2018 and 2019, then grew by 2.2 percent in 2019-20 from the previous year. Associate degree earners with a prior certificate grew even more (4.5%).

Figure 8. Non-First-Time Graduates (Graduates with Prior Awards) by Type of Award



To summarize, within just a few months after the WHO declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic, the nation has come to a standstill in undergraduate degree recipients. The pandemic appears to be having differential impacts. It gave a further boost to students earning a bachelor's degree as their first-ever completion, yet their sub-baccalaureate counterparts started to drop. In addition, stacked credentials continued to gain momentum despite the pandemic-induced disruptions.

A lack of overall progress in the nation's undergraduate earners numbers in 2019-2020 reflects the early pandemic impacts on postsecondary attainment, particularly for first-time graduates earning a sub-baccalaureate credential. These early effects likely will persist considering the community college enrollment declines reported in our [COVID-19 Stay Informed](#) and [Transfer, Mobility and Progress](#) report series.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The *Undergraduate Degree Earners Report* provides a basic demographic and education credential profile for all students who are graduating with an undergraduate-level credential each year, which may include associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, or certificates. In this report, we profile the undergraduate credential earners during the most recent academic year 2019-20, focusing on first-time versus non-first-time graduates, and examine change over time in student demographics (gender and age) and credentials attained (AA, BA, or certificates) over the last eight years, since the 2012-13 academic year. Trend data are analyzed for the nation, as well as by state and by region, all of which can be found in this Appendix. All data prior to the most recent year reflects newer and additional data reported to the Student Clearinghouse since publication.

Included in this report is a brief analysis of the pandemic impact on undergraduate degree earners. After replicating the results with a fixed panel of institutions between 2018 to 2020 by awarding month, national trends described in this report between April and June reflect the early pandemic impact.

Definition of *First-Time Graduate*

Students are considered to be first-time graduates if the credential attained during the reported academic year (July 1 to June 30) is their first postsecondary award from a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S. Each student is counted as a first-time graduate only once, in the academic year of his or her first postsecondary credential. A student who earned two credentials in the academic year of his or her first credential is counted under the highest level of credential attained in that year. Certificate earners with no prior awards are classified as first-time graduates.

Degree Data Coverage and Weighting

The National Student Clearinghouse collects graduation information from its participating institutions via two data reporting services: Enrollment Reporting (ER) and DegreeVerify (DV). Enrollment Reporting has slightly higher data coverage rates, but for credentials reported prior to 2013-14, it generally includes only basic completion information, such as graduation indicator and the date of graduation. DV includes enhanced information on completions, including degree title, major, level, and CIP code, and comprised 95 percent of credentials granted by Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as of fall 2018. The overall undergraduate credential earner numbers each year are based only on awards reported to DV, but prior award status is determined by records from both ER and DV. In cases where the prior award did not appear in a DV record (approximately 1.9% of the 2017 bachelors' degree earners, 2.7% of associate degree earners and 2.4% of certificate earners), the level of the prior award was imputed based on the institution level and related enrollment records. To adjust for the DV participation rate, weights were applied to each degree record included in this report. Weights were derived by calculating the inverse of the rate of degree data coverage for each combination of year, institution sector, award level (BA, AA or certificate), and student gender. To obtain degree data coverage for each combination of year, sector, and award level, Clearinghouse degree data were compared to IPEDS Completions Survey data for all Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

Imputation of Gender

Gender data were reported for over 80 percent of students included in this report. Missing gender data were imputed using a table of name-gender pairs that the Research Center developed using data from the Census Bureau and the Social Security Administration as well as the institution-reported data. The imputation used only those pairs in which the name had at least two instances and was associated with a single gender in at least 95 percent of the instances. The imputation is accurate in 99.6 percent of the cases with known gender.

Degree-Granting Status

When referencing IPEDS postsecondary awards data, it is important to distinguish degree-granting institutions from non-degree-granting institutions. Clearinghouse certificate and degree data, as well as the IPEDS comparison data used for the weighting calculation in this report, are limited to degrees and certificates awarded by Title IV, degree-granting U.S. institutions.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Huie, F., Liu, Q., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (January 2021), Undergraduate Degree Earners, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.