



November 2024

POLICY INSIGHT SERIES

EARLY FINDINGS FROM THE MASSRECONNECT PROGRAM:

*Expanding Free Community College
Access for Adult Learners*



Massachusetts has recently made significant strides in college access and affordability by leveraging new Fair Share revenues. Beginning with the launch of MassReconnect in Fall 2023, the state offered free community college to adults over the age of 25. This Fall, with MassEducate, the program expanded to all Massachusetts residents, becoming the most comprehensive of its kind in the nation. This early evaluation examines MassReconnect's impact on adult student enrollment, who benefited, and who missed out. These findings provide insights to guide future improvements and ensure that these investments achieve maximum impact.

MassReconnect Early Evaluation

A Snapshot

Positive Outcomes

- **Increased Access:** 12% increase in community college enrollment for adults 25+.
- **Diverse Participation:** Racial diversity among recipients matches community college demographics.

Challenges Identified

- **FAFSA Barrier:** 2,872 eligible students missed out due to incomplete FAFSA, 51% non-white.
- **Funding Skew:** 57% of recipients not Pell-eligible, so funds mainly benefit moderate-income students.

Areas to Monitor

- **Transfer Patterns:** Track if students are transferring from four-year colleges to community colleges.
- **Retention Needs:** 33% of recipients discontinued after one semester; support for persistence is essential.

Recommendations

- **Increase FAFSA/MASFA Completion:** Target adult and non-white outreach.
- **Promote Pathway Awareness:** Highlight MassGrant Plus for four-year college aspirants.
- **Broaden Support:** Address unmet needs like transportation and childcare.
- **Expand Services:** Boost teaching capacity and wrap-around services for retention.

MassReconnect Program Overview

What It Provides:

- It covers tuition and fees after federal and state aid have been applied
- It provides an allowance for books and supplies

How It Works:

Awards are provided directly by community colleges at enrollment, available throughout the academic year.

Eligibility Requirements:

- **Age:** 25 years or older (as of the first day of classes)
- **Institutions:** Public community colleges in MA
- **Residency:** MA resident for at least 1 year prior to enrollment
- **Education:** No prior associate or bachelor's degree
- **FAFSA/MASFA:** Must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or MA equivalent
- **Citizenship:** U.S. citizen or eligible under Tuition Equity law
- **Enrollment:** Minimum of 6 credits per semester
- **Academic Progress:** Meet institution & federal standards

Impact on Fall 2023 Enrollment:

Community college enrollment among adults aged 25+ rose by 12% (+2,635 students) from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, with **9% (+2,423 new students)** of the increase attributed to MassReconnect grant recipients.

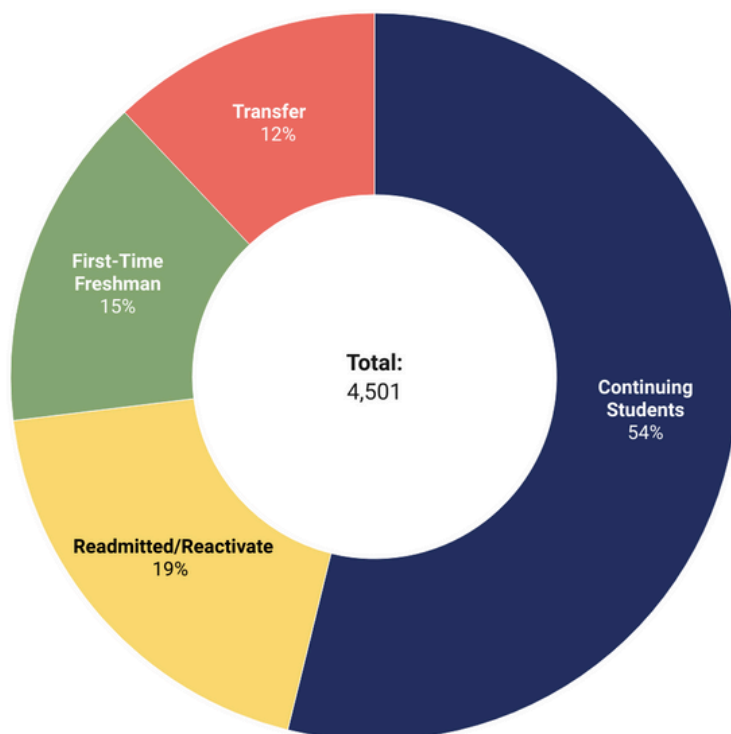
Overall, community college enrollment increased [by 8.7% from 62,344 in Fall 2002 to 67,744 to Fall 2023 \(5,400 students\)](#), indicating that the surge in adult students accounts for about half of the total enrollment growth.

MassReconnect Grants were awarded to 4,501 students in Fall 2023, with 2,078 (46%) being new enrollees, either first-time, transfer, or re-admitted students. The remaining 2,423 were existing students who became eligible under this new program.

Fall 2023 MassReconnect Recipients

Out of 4,501 MassReconnect recipients, 2,078 (46%) were newly enrolled students, including first-time enrollees, transfer students, and re-admitted students.

■ Continuing Students ■ Readmitted/Reactivate ■ First-Time Freshman ■ Transfer



Source: Hildreth Institute analysis based on data from the Massachusetts Department of Education's MassReconnect Legislative Report, May 23, 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

1 The Institute has requested updated data from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, indicating that the total number of MassReconnect recipients is 4,655 for Fall 2023 and 6,039 for Spring 2024. However, we do not have the data breakdowns for these updated totals to generate the graph above and the one below with racial demographics.

Where Do MassReconnect's Transfer Students Come From?

There is concern that the promise of free college may attract students to transfer from four-year institutions to community colleges, potentially enrolling in programs that don't fully match their academic aspirations or career potential. To understand this trend, it is essential to examine the background of MassReconnect transfer students, who make up 12% of the recipients. Since the program's eligibility requires at least one year of Massachusetts residency and defines "new transfers" as those with previous college experience, most of these students are likely transferring from in-state, four-year institutions. By analyzing this transfer pattern, we can better ensure that MassReconnect supports students in pathways aligned with their educational and professional ambitions.

Who Benefited?

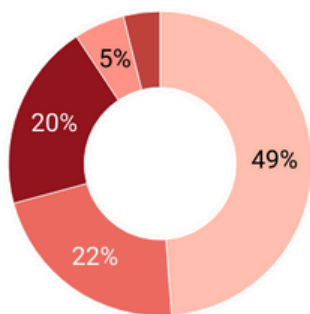
By Race:

Enrollment diversity remained consistent from Fall 2022, before MassReconnect, to Fall 2023. Likewise, the racial diversity of MassReconnect recipients closely mirrored the overall student population, with a slightly higher representation of Hispanic or Latino students and a slightly lower representation of Black or African American students, showing minor differences of 1-2%.

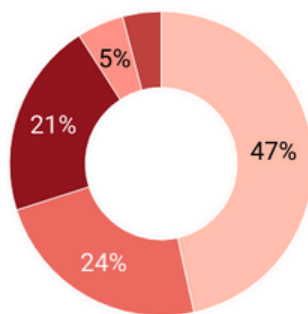
Enrollment by race Across Fall 2022, Fall 2023, and MassReconnect Recipients

Racial diversity is comparable; grant recipients slightly more Hispanic/Latino, slightly fewer Black/African American

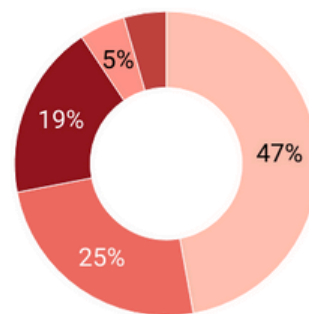
White Hispanic or Latino Black or African American Asian or Pacific Islander Other



Fall 2022 Enrollment



Fall 2023 Enrollment



MassReconnect Recipients

Source: Hildreth Institute analysis based on data from the Massachusetts Department of Education's MassReconnect Legislative Report, May 23, 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

By Financial Need:

MassReconnect is a "last-dollar" grant program that covers any remaining tuition and fees after all other federal and state financial aid has been applied. Importantly, MassReconnect does not require students to demonstrate financial need, making it accessible to anyone aged 25 or older. For students eligible for the Pell Grant—awarded based on significant financial need—the benefits of MassReconnect are limited. Here's why:

- **Maximum Pell Grant:** For the 2023–24 academic year, the **maximum Pell Grant is \$7,395**.
- **Average Community College Costs:** The average tuition and fees at **Massachusetts community colleges are \$6,846**.

Since the Pell Grant often covers these tuition costs entirely, there's usually little left for MassReconnect to cover. Therefore, Pell-eligible students may not receive substantial additional tuition support from MassReconnect, though they might get some assistance with books and supplies.

Data from the Department of Higher Education indicates that 57% of MassReconnect recipients were not Pell-eligible, which suggests that the program's funding primarily supports students who don't qualify for federal aid, covering their full tuition and fees, and providing an additional books and supplies allowance up to \$1,200.

Pell Eligibility of MassReconnect Recipients

Not Pell Eligible

57%

Pell Eligible

43%

Source: Hildreth Institute analysis based on data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Education • Created with Datawrapper

Currently, detailed data on average MassReconnect grant amounts broken down by Pell eligibility or income level is unavailable for further analysis. However, we can estimate that the 57% of MassReconnect recipients—3,439 students enrolled in Fall 2024—receive a significant share of the \$24 million allocated to this program. These students can receive over \$8,000 in MassReconnect support, covering tuition and fees costs of \$6,846 plus a \$1,200 stipend for books and supplies.

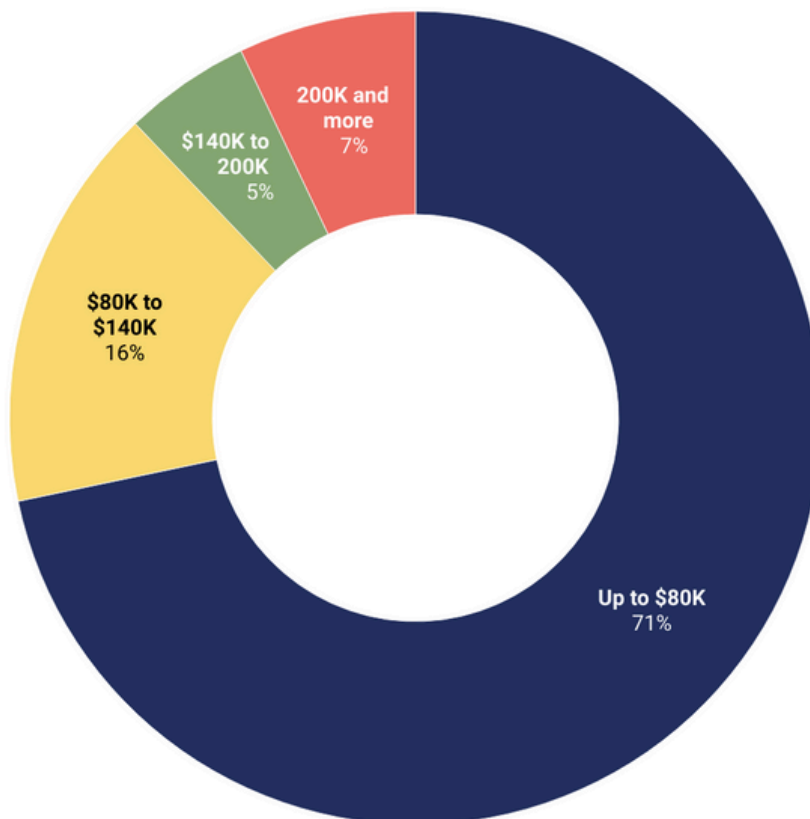
By Income:

Considering the demographics served by community colleges, it's essential to recognize that many non-Pell-eligible students still come from moderate-income households and often experience unmet financial need. Data shows that about **70% of MassReconnect recipients have household incomes under \$80,000 AGI**, which is slightly below the state median. A smaller portion, around **12%**, comes from higher-income households, with **7% earning over \$200,000**.

Building on the previous point about Pell eligibility, while higher-income students make up a smaller share of the overall population served by MassReconnect, they are likely receiving a disproportionately large portion of the program's funding, compared to those with lower-income household.

Adjusted Gross Income Distribution of MassReconnect Recipients

Most recipients have an AGI below \$80K, close to the state median, with over 12% in higher income brackets.



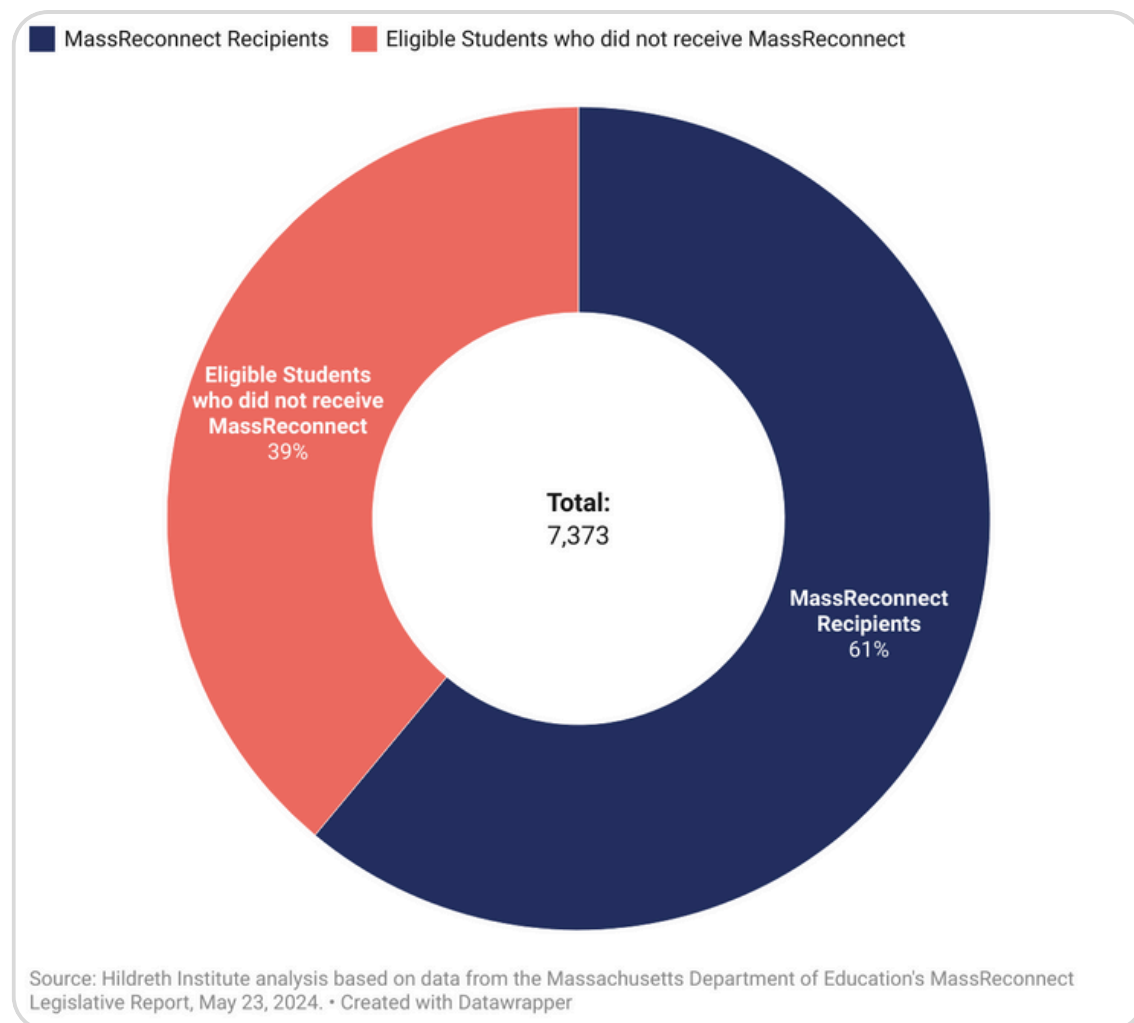
Source: Hildreth Institute analysis based on data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Education • Created with Datawrapper

Who Missed Out?

A significant finding is that **over one-third (2,872 students) of those eligible missed out on MassReconnect** simply by not completing the FAFSA. Additionally, there are racial disparities, with 51% of eligible FAFSA non-filers identifying as non-white.

This trend may reflect that students aged 25+ are less likely to be familiar with the FAFSA or know how to access assistance with the application. Understanding these barriers could improve access.

Over 1/3 of Eligible Students (2,872 Individuals) Missed Out on MassReconnect Due to Not Completing FAFSA



Ensuring Degree Completion

While MassReconnect has successfully expanded access, it's essential to support these students in persisting and graduating. Increased enrollments have stretched [capacity](#) and [staffing](#) at community colleges, which may in turn impact students' experiences and academic outcomes. Early data show a fall-to-spring persistence rate of 67.2% among MassReconnect students. Although we lack direct comparisons, the one-year persistence rate for Fall 2022 enrollees was [60.2%](#).

Fall-to-Spring Persistence Rate of MassReconnect Recipients

1,525 MassReconnect students did not continue to the spring semester in their first year

Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Persistence rate
4,647	3,122	67%

The Fall 2023 MassReconnect numbers shown here are higher than in previous analyses, as they reflect updated snapshot data recently obtained.

Source: Hildreth Institute analysis based on data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Education' • Created with Datawrapper

This underscores the importance of closely tracking persistence rates and offering robust support services to ensure these students' continued success. Community college graduation rates have remained [stagnant at 34%](#) over the past five years (2018-2023), while transfer rates have slightly declined from [21.8% to 20%](#). Addressing these trends is essential for improving outcomes as more students take advantage of free community college opportunities.

Main Takeaways and Next Steps

With the Fall 2024 expansion of MassReconnect through the new MassEducate program, all Massachusetts residents now have access to free community college, regardless of age or income. This broadened access presents new opportunities as well as challenges that demand careful oversight.

- 1. Boosting FAFSA & MASFA Completion**

Many eligible students missed out on MassReconnect simply because they didn't submit a FAFSA. Understanding the reasons—whether due to lack of awareness among adult learners or other barriers—is crucial. Additionally, with the new [Tuition Equity Law](#) granting undocumented residents access to in-state tuition and state aid, tracking completion rates of [MAFSA](#), the Massachusetts alternative FAFSA, among these students will be essential.
- 2. Supporting Optimal Educational Paths**

With free community college now accessible to all, it's crucial to monitor how students—whether transfers or those continuing their education—are choosing their educational paths. It's essential to effectively communicate affordability initiatives like [MassGrant Plus and its expansion](#), which provide generous financial support to students intending to enroll at four-year institutions. By ensuring students are aware of these options, we can help them make informed decisions that best align with their aspirations and career goals. This targeted messaging and oversight can prevent students from opting for free community college when they could access similar benefits at four-year institutions more suited to their long-term objectives.
- 3. Meeting Financial Needs for Low-Income Students**

Enrollment has risen in response to free community college messaging, but many low-income students, despite receiving Pell Grants, still face unmet needs for essentials like transportation, food, and childcare. Ensuring adequate financial support is crucial, as unmet needs can lead to excessive work hours, impacting academic success and completion.
- 4. Strengthening and Expanding Student Support Services and Teaching Capacity**

With anticipated enrollment growth, community colleges need sufficient resources and teaching capacity to support new students. Strengthening wrap-around services such as tutoring, career advising, and mental health support will be vital for student retention and success.