

# Issue Brief

March 2022

Postsecondary Enrollment Declines  
**Slow Progress Toward Arizona's  
Achieve60AZ Attainment Goal**



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## About Education Forward Arizona

Education Forward Arizona advocates for and acts on education improvements that advance the quality of life for all Arizonans.

## Acknowledgments

**Dr. Richard Daniel** is the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Education Forward Arizona. He is the lead author of this brief and directs development of the organization’s research publications on key issues related to improving education in Arizona.

Collaborative Communications Group contributed to the production of this brief.



As the resurgent pandemic continues to shape how our nation and our state operate on a fundamental level, Arizona's education system faces the solemn reality that the effects of the pandemic will continue to impact students and families, from pre-Kindergarten to postsecondary, for a long time to come.

The path forward is made more difficult by the inequity and disparities that, under normal circumstances, define our P-20 education system. The impact of these disparities has been made all the worse by the disruptions of the three most recent academic years. While the pandemic has been difficult for all, for some students and their families it has been devastating to their health, finances, educations, and prospects for the future. In large measure, these students were at a disadvantage before the pandemic began.

Student experiences and outcomes have long varied widely in Arizona, and achievement and attainment patterns are often predictable along lines of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geography.

Of course, the education challenges we face as a state are not restricted to the postsecondary sector. Students and families throughout the education continuum, from early childhood to workforce, have been profoundly affected by the pandemic. It is incumbent upon the state to provide the funding and support for programs and services—delivered by schools, districts, community organizations, and postsecondary institutions—that students of all ages need to recover from the disruption and thrive in school, college, and a career.

As we work to move forward and build a better, more equitable state, Arizona cannot lose sight of its commitment to equitably increasing postsecondary attainment. Progress toward the Achieve60AZ goal—of ensuring that 60 percent of Arizonans ages 25–64 hold a postsecondary credential by 2030—continues to be imperative, both in the near-term and as Arizona looks to its future. Not only is reversing the decline in postsecondary attainment essential to [Arizona's economy and workforce](#), now and post-pandemic, but it is also essential to strengthening communities and expanding economic opportunity statewide.

## About This Brief

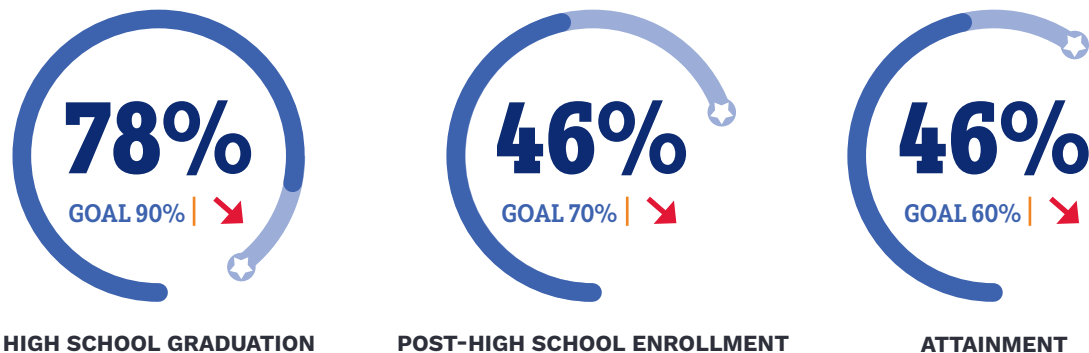
This brief discusses key indicators of how the pandemic has impacted—and continues to impact—postsecondary participation in Arizona. These indicators illustrate the importance of developing an intentional, statewide strategy for increasing postsecondary access and enrollment as our state continues to manage the pandemic and plan for recovery. It also highlights how the state can help accelerate recovery and long-term improvement in the postsecondary sector by making our higher education system stronger and more equitable for all students and families in Arizona.



## Progress Meter Indicators Show That Recent Gains Have Been Reversed

The Arizona Education Progress Meter has long been a reliable resource for understanding where we stand as a state when it comes to key education issues and measures of our P-20 system. The most recent updates to the Progress Meter show widespread declines across the education spectrum; indeed, the state showed improvement on only a single indicator, thanks to a reduction in the number of youths who are neither in school nor working.<sup>1</sup>

On three key indicators related to postsecondary participation and success—high school graduation, post-high school enrollment, and attainment rates—show significant declines from previous years, as well as widening gaps between current rates and our statewide goals.



Source: Arizona Department of Education<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, these indicators paint a bleak picture for increasing attainment in Arizona. One of the broader implications of these gaps is that it is unlikely that we will meet our Progress Meter goals without large-scale interventions at the state level. In particular, the likelihood of achieving our 60 percent attainment goal by 2030 is in jeopardy.



## The Pandemic Impact on Postsecondary Enrollment

In keeping with national trends, postsecondary enrollment in Arizona is in decline for the second year running. This decline primarily results from plummeting enrollment across Arizona's community colleges and despite notable enrollment increases at Arizona State University and the University of Arizona.

### ABOR Institutions Reported Enrollment Growth in the Past Two Years

Fall 2020 enrollment numbers for the ABOR institutions—which were reflective of a time when uncertainty regarding the pandemic was still high—show that overall year-over-year undergraduate enrollment increased by 4.5 percent, driven largely by increased enrollment in online programs.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Fall 2021 numbers show that undergraduate enrollment at Arizona State University and the University of Arizona continued to grow. Arizona State University reported a 3.7 percent undergraduate enrollment increase, inclusive of a 2.5 percent increase in undergraduates taking classes on campus. The University of Arizona reported a 4.8 percent increase. Undergraduate enrollment at Northern Arizona University, meanwhile, declined again in Fall 2021, by 4.2 percent; since 2019, undergraduate enrollment is down 8.8 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Notably, though, across all three institutions there was a slight (0.7 percent) decrease in the number of Arizona residents who enrolled in Fall 2021.

Fall 2021 Undergraduate Enrollment, by ABOR Institution			
INSTITUTION	OVERALL	% AZ RESIDENTS	% CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR
Arizona State University	107,425	48.3	3.7
Northern Arizona University	24,162	65.8	-4.2
University of Arizona	37,434	58.0	4.8

Source: Arizona Board of Regents



## Community Colleges Are Vital to Arizona but Enrollment Remains Down

Community colleges play an essential, but underappreciated, role in Arizona's education system and in our efforts to reach 60 percent postsecondary attainment by 2030. In 2018-19, the academic year immediately preceding the pandemic, Arizona community colleges collectively enrolled 285,388 students.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, 151,084 undergraduate students were enrolled across the three ABOR institutions in the fall of the 2018-2019 academic year.<sup>6</sup> While pandemic related enrollment declines at community colleges and the aforementioned growth at ABOR institutions have reduced this difference, it remains true that community colleges enroll the majority of postsecondary students in Arizona.

Moreover, community colleges in Arizona enroll large numbers of students from historically underserved and underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In 2018-19, 47 percent of community college students in Arizona were members of such a group.<sup>7</sup>

Community colleges also serve significant numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. Nearly one-quarter of students enrolled at Arizona community colleges are Pell Grant (the federal student aid program that awards grants based on financial need) recipients.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, community colleges represent an important driver of increased access to postsecondary education opportunity and a key sector for increasing statewide attainment. They provide an affordable college education—in the form of industry-recognized certificates and degree programs, and by preparing students to transfer to a four-year institution—to any student who wishes to enroll.

Additionally, community colleges provide adult basic education and retraining, developmental education, and support for regional economies through workforce development. Recently, their role was expanded even further in Arizona through a policy that enables community colleges to offer certain four-year degree programs.

But, despite their expansive and crucial role, community colleges in Arizona do not receive the funding and support from the state that they need to effectively carry out their mission. Given how many students Arizona community colleges serve, and how many of those students are historically underrepresented in higher education, declining enrollments are cause for grave concern.



Notable enrollment numbers have recovered slightly in Fall 2021 compared to the steep drops experienced in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. Three institutions, Arizona Western College, Central Arizona College, and Yavapai College, are even returning to or exceeding pre-pandemic levels.<sup>9</sup>

<b>Arizona Community College Enrollment Comparison: Fall 2019 and Fall 2021</b>			
	<b>FALL 2019</b>	<b>FALL 2021</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE CHANGE</b>
Arizona Western College	8,207	8,368	2%
Central Arizona College	5,714	6,073	6%
Cochise College	3,380	3,012	-11%
Coconino Community College	3,582	2,943	-18%
Eastern Arizona College	6,027	4,549	-25%
Maricopa Community Colleges	114,482	95,223	-17%
Mohave Community College	4,413	3,772	-15%
Northland Pioneer College	2,774	2,710	-2%
Pima Community College	20,742	16,845	-19%
Yavapai College	7,429	7,526	1%
Overall	176,750	151,021	-15%

Source: Arizona Republic

But despite these indications of localized recovery, Arizona's overall community college enrollment remains 15 percent lower than it was in Fall 2019. This is largely because Maricopa Community Colleges and Pima Community College are continuing to see major enrollment declines. Maricopa's enrollment is down 17 percent from Fall 2019, while Pima's enrollment is down 19 percent.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these declines mean that 23,000 fewer students—predominantly Arizona residents—are now enrolled in the two largest community college districts in the state.



## Two Key Barriers to Increasing Postsecondary Participation and Success

Concern about the overall decline in undergraduate postsecondary enrollment and attainment in Arizona cannot be separated from alarm about two key factors that have significant influence on our state's rates of postsecondary participation: high school graduation rates and FAFSA completion.

### High School Graduation Rates in Arizona Are Among the Lowest in the Nation

Nationwide, high school graduation rates have remained stable during the pandemic, with small observable increases and declines depending on school characteristics.<sup>11</sup> This is good news, of course, in that it shows that the pandemic has not forced high school students to abandon their education before they earn their diploma, a milestone that is critical to later postsecondary participation and success in the workforce.

But even before the pandemic, Arizona's high school graduation rate was problematically low. In 2020, just 78 percent of high school students graduated in four years; this rate is significantly lower than the most recently reported national average of 86 percent.<sup>12</sup>

**Four Year High School Graduation Rate, 2019 and 2020 Cohorts, by Race/Ethnicity**

GROUP	2019 COHORT			2020 COHORT		
	NUMBER GRADUATED	NUMBER IN COHORT	PERCENT GRADUATED	NUMBER GRADUATED	NUMBER IN COHORT	PERCENT GRADUATED
<b>All</b>	<b>68,393</b>	<b>86,355</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>68,681</b>	<b>87,844</b>	<b>78</b>
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,617	3,772	69	2,591	3,790	68
Asian	2,281	2,460	93	2,181	2,359	92
Black/African American	3,482	4,615	75	3,403	4,694	73
Hispanic or Latino	29,231	38,562	76	29,725	39,626	75
Multiple Races	2,319	3,138	74	2,759	3,775	73
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	223	271	82	179	224	80
White	28,240	33,536	84	27,841	33,371	83

Source: Arizona Department of Education; percentages rounded<sup>13</sup>





In fact, Arizona's high school graduation rate is consistently lower than almost every other state; in 2017-2018, for example, only the District of Columbia and New Mexico had lower high school graduation rates than Arizona.<sup>14</sup>

<b>Four Year High School Graduation Rate, 2019 and 2020 Cohorts, by County</b>						
<b>COUNTY</b>	<b>2019 COHORT</b>			<b>2020 COHORT</b>		
	<b>NUMBER GRADUATED</b>	<b>NUMBER IN COHORT</b>	<b>PERCENT GRADUATED</b>	<b>NUMBER GRADUATED</b>	<b>NUMBER IN COHORT</b>	<b>PERCENT GRADUATED</b>
Apache	588	762	77	653	808	81
Cochise	1,174	1,390	85	1,260	1,558	81
Coconino	1,224	1,438	85	1,221	1,437	85
Gila	399	510	78	442	555	80
Graham	422	474	89	433	510	85
Greenlee	102	110	93	99	118	84
La Paz	158	179	88	150	176	85
Maricopa	46,102	58,343	79	46,258	59,285	78
Mohave	1,348	1,706	79	1,322	1,669	79
Navajo	1,147	1,379	83	1,140	1,408	81
Pima	8,818	11,798	75	8,649	11,650	74
Pinal	2,679	3,301	81	2,643	3,453	77
Santa Cruz	742	802	93	727	803	91
Yavapai	1,457	1,788	82	1,531	1,867	82
Yuma	2,612	2,943	89	2,651	3,007	88

Source: Arizona Department of Education; percentages rounded<sup>15</sup>

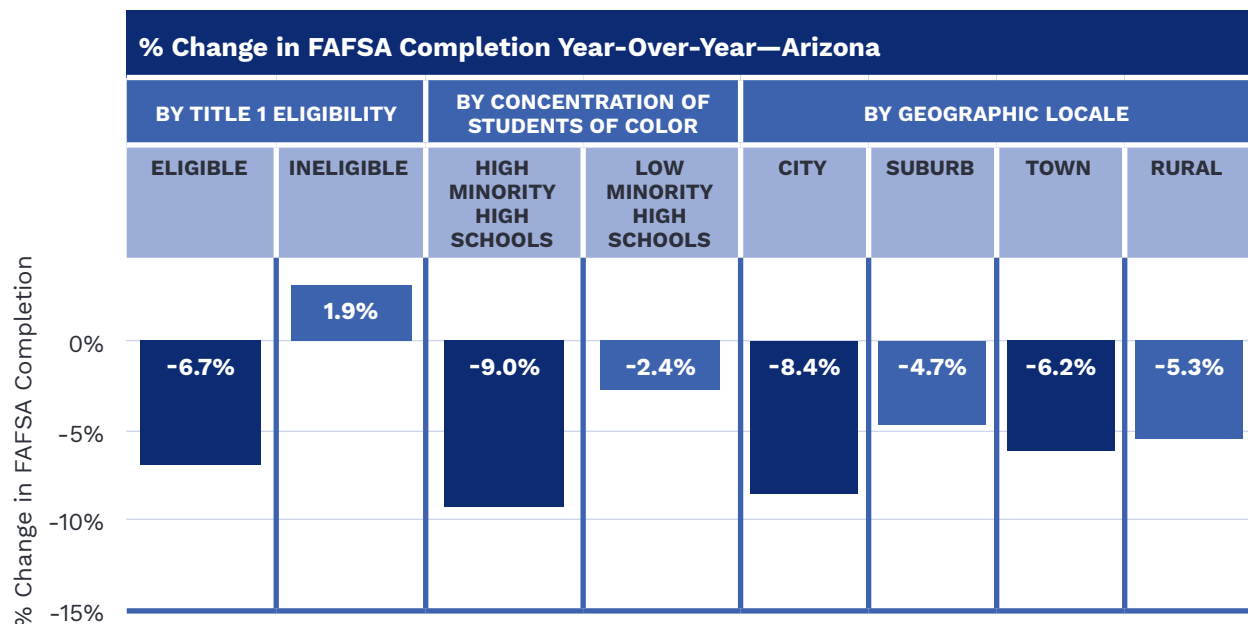
For Arizona to increase the overall high school graduation rate, it is particularly important that we pursue initiatives and provide supports designed to increase graduation rates for students from populations that have been historically underserved by our schools and underrepresented in our institutions of higher education.



## Arizona Ranks Among the Bottom States for FAFSA Completion

In recent years, Arizona has had one of the lowest FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion rates in the country, despite intensive efforts by community organizations and the state to promote increased completion. This persistently low FAFSA completion rate is problematic, both in terms of increasing access to financial aid for Arizona students who need it and in terms of statewide efforts to increase postsecondary attainment. As the National College Attainment Network points out, FAFSA completion “is one of the best predictors of whether a high school senior will go on to college, as seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84 [percent] more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education.”<sup>16</sup>

Current data on high school seniors in Arizona show that our historically low FAFSA completion rate has grown worse during the pandemic. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year (as of September 3, 2021), only 43.8 percent of the graduating class of 2021—the class poised to make the transition from high school to postsecondary—had completed the FAFSA; this amounts to an almost six percent decrease—2,417 fewer FAFSA completions—compared to the rate for the previous academic year.<sup>17</sup>



Source: National College Attainment Network



Arizona ranks 48th among all states and the District of Columbia in terms of FAFSA completion.<sup>18</sup> By comparison, the national FAFSA completion rate is 58 percent (-4 percent compared to the previous year). Louisiana and Tennessee, both of which have established strong FAFSA completion incentives at the state level, had the highest completion rates—approximately 78 and 74 percent respectively (again, as of September 3, 2021).<sup>19</sup>

What is more, FAFSA completion rates for students from low-income high schools and high schools that serve large numbers of racial and ethnic minorities have declined at a much greater rate than they have for schools that serve more affluent or predominantly white student populations.

## Moving Arizona Forward

The available data on postsecondary enrollment in Arizona before and during the ongoing pandemic paints a mixed picture. The fact that two of the three large public universities in the state have been able to sustain enrollment growth is clearly something to celebrate. It is also true that the nascent momentum, with regard to postsecondary participation, that the state as a whole seemed to be building before the onset of the pandemic has been halted by declining community college enrollment and decreased FAFSA completion.

We cannot be complacent and believe that the successes of Arizona State University and the University of Arizona are indicative of a full recovery. We continue to face significant challenges—among them significant and entrenched inequities—when it comes to expanding access to postsecondary education and increasing attainment.

It will require a multi-year, multi-pronged effort for our state to counteract the negative effects of the ongoing pandemic on postsecondary enrollment and attainment. Knowing this, we have an opportunity to not only support students, families, educators, and institutions in the near term, but also to strengthen our education systems so that they are more effective and more equitable in the long term.

We have a responsibility to ensure that our schools serve all students equitably and to make postsecondary education more accessible and more affordable for every student in our state. This effort will necessarily require the state to reconsider how education is funded and to commit to providing targeted K-12 funding for the students and schools that need it most. Additionally, state-sponsored postsecondary initiatives—such as expanding the recently created state promise program, establishing a need-based grant aid program, or enhancing efforts to facilitate and incentivize FAFSA completion—must be at the heart of our collective response to the pandemic.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>11</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (March 2021). High School Benchmarks: COVID-19 Special Analysis Update and Correction. Author. [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021\\_HSBenchmarksCovidReport.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021_HSBenchmarksCovidReport.pdf)
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- <sup>13</sup> Arizona Department of Education. Accountability & Research Data: Graduation Rates, "Cohort 2020 Four Year Graduation Rate Data." <https://www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data/>
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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.