CLOSING THE COLLEGE GRADUATION GAP:
2021 National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report
Even in a normal year, the postsecondary pathways of first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds, many of them students of color, are tenuous and fraught with uncertainty due to structural obstacles and inequities. However, this brief does not arrive in a normal year. Pervasive uncertainty due to the COVID-19 virus is currently roiling the United States and the globe. The rollout of vaccines is quelling infection rates and offers hope moving forward. Still, the toll on the nearly 600,000 deceased in the U.S. alone and those still living left behind is nearly unfathomable. For students, the damage done to postsecondary aspirations and plans is substantial and likely to reverberate moving forward through successive classes.

In no time in recent memory has it been more important to understand the postsecondary outcomes of students historically underrepresented in postsecondary education. Since 2014, the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) has examined the postsecondary outcomes of students served by NCAN members, largely college access programs and community-based organizations. A series of five reports consistently found the following:

- Member-served students enroll at rates exceeding not only their peers but also at rates exceeding or approaching those of students from better-resourced communities traditionally more familiar with the college-going process.
- Member-served students’ six-year completion rate outcomes significantly exceed national college completion benchmarks that control for high school-level characteristics, but member-served students trail overall national college completion benchmarks for all students.

For years, NCAN has emphasized the importance of measuring outcomes to understand areas of effectiveness and places where the field can make improvements. Using data to shine a light on student outcomes is a way to improve both practice and policy to help more students attain postsecondary success.

This brief largely considers the postsecondary outcomes of NCAN member-served students from the high school classes of 2019 and 2020. Focusing on these classes offers a snapshot of outcomes immediately preceding and following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. National data tells us that postsecondary enrollment declined sharply in the fall 2020 semester both overall and for recent high school seniors. Unfortunately, pernicious inequities based on income, race, and ethnicity appear in these enrollment outcomes and in leading indicators like Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion and college applications.

NCAN members largely serve the underrepresented populations identified above, but these students’ national outcomes are not a foregone conclusion in the presence of college access services. The supports provided to students by NCAN members inoculated them to some extent from the declines seen elsewhere. Specifically:

1 https://www.ncan.org/page/BenchmarkingProject
58.9% of NCAN member-students in our sample from the class of 2020 enrolled in fall 2020 compared to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s 56.5% enrollment rate benchmark.

By high school characteristics, NCAN member-served students exceeded the NSCRC benchmark in six of seven categories.

Although 35 of 37 NCAN member programs in the sample saw first-fall enrollment rate declines from the class of 2019 to the class of 2020, 25 of those 37 programs’ first-fall enrollment rates still exceeded the NSCRC’s national benchmark.

These findings are bittersweet for NCAN, our members, and the field. It is clearly encouraging that NCAN member-served students’ outcomes still edged out those of students nationally, but the results herein also represent substantial declines in outcomes compared to 2019. Those declines represent in turn the derailment of students’ postsecondary pathways. Substantial work is ahead for our field and our nation to reconnect students with the college and career pathways to which they aspired. NCAN and our members will be ready to face that challenge.

COMPARING THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES OF 2019 AND 2020

Data from the NSCRC illuminate the postsecondary enrollment declines in the fall 2020 semester. These declines bear any number of adjectives; seismic, horrific, and astonishing come to mind given the impacts on students’ postsecondary trajectories the data represents.

The NSCRC estimates that “overall postsecondary enrollments declined 2.5% in fall 2020,” which was almost double the rate of decline from the previous fall semester. An undergraduate enrollment decline of 3.6%, or more than half a million fewer students, drove the overall decline. Freshman enrollment was still steeper, 13.1% or more than 325,000 students.²

The estimates above come from the NSCRC’s work on overall enrollment trends, but this brief focuses on the NSCRC’s High School Benchmarks series. These reports consider postsecondary outcomes by high school graduating class. The reports disaggregate outcomes by high school characteristics.

Overall, the NSCRC estimates that 56.5% of class of 2020 high school graduates enrolled in the fall 2020 semester. NCAN member-served students exceeded this rate; 58.9% of students in the NCAN sample, across 37 member programs, from the class of 2020 enrolled last fall. Among the 37 member programs, there were 17,376 students from the high school class of 2019 and 19,026 students from the class of 2020.

² [https://public.tableau.com/views/Fall20203asofOct_22/Fall2020EnrollmentNo_3?language=en&embed=y&embedded_code_version=3&loadOrderID=0&display_count=y&publish=yes&origin=viz_share_link](https://public.tableau.com/views/Fall20203asofOct_22/Fall2020EnrollmentNo_3?language=en&embed=y&embedded_code_version=3&loadOrderID=0&display_count=y&publish=yes&origin=viz_share_link)
The NSCRC notes that the 56.5% enrollment rate was a decline of 4.1 percentage points compared to the class of 2019 (60.5%). This is a 6.7% decrease. For NCAN member-served students, the decline was steeper. Member-served class of 2020 students’ 58.9% first-fall enrollment rate was a 10.6 percentage-point decrease and a 15.3% decrease from the class of 2019.

The steeper decline in enrollment rates from 2019 to 2020 for NCAN member programs is dismaying, to be sure, but it is important to put it in context. We know COVID-19 disproportionately impacted the students typically served by NCAN members (students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, first-generation students). Additionally, we see that NCAN member-served students’ enrollment rates have consistently been higher than NSCRC benchmarks in previous rounds of this study.

These two realities explain the steep declines we observe for the class of 2020: member-served students do well when receiving college access supports (hence the higher overall enrollment rate than the NSC benchmark), but they still face the same challenges as their peers not served by college access programs. Essentially, member-served students started at a higher point than their peers in the class of 2019 and consequently had further to fall in 2020, which is what we see with the steep percentage declines above.

**FIRST-FALL ENROLLMENT BY HIGH SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS**
Comparing postsecondary outcomes by high school characteristics yields positive news for students served by NCAN members in the Benchmarking Project sample. Figure 2 below shows the fall 2020 postsecondary enrollment rates from both the NSCRC High School Benchmarks report and NCAN’s Benchmarking Sample.

Figure 2. First Fall Enrollment by High School Characteristics, Class of 2020, NCAN and NSCRC

The postsecondary enrollment rates of member-served students exceeded the NSCRC’s national benchmarks in each examined category other than low-minority high schools (where less than 40% of students are Black or Hispanic). This lends credence to the idea that NCAN member programs’ supports mattered in preventing “COVID-19 melt” that derailed many students’ plans.

NCAN’s low-income high school benchmark for the class of 2020 was 56.5% compared to 47.2% for the NSC. Similarly, NCAN’s high-minority high school benchmark (where Black and Hispanic students comprise more than 40% of enrollment) was 57.7% compared to the NSC’s 48.9%. As in previous rounds of the Benchmarking Project, member-served students’ enrollment rates exceed those of the
NSC’s higher-income and low-minority high school benchmarks. These figures are encouraging for NCAN members in the sample and demonstrate they are delivering on their mission in helping students access postsecondary education. That said, both NSC figures being below 50% nationally shows how much work there is to do and how great the need is for college advising services.

**ENROLLMENT RATE OUTCOMES BY PROGRAM**

Beyond considering first-fall enrollment rates in the aggregate, we can also consider the distribution of outcomes across member programs. Figure 3 below shows the percent change in first-fall enrollment from the class of 2019 to the class of 2020 by member program.

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Figure 3. % Change in First Fall Enrollment Rate by Member Program, Class of 2019 to Class of 2020

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3 Worth noting is that the programs involved in the NCAN Benchmarking Project fluctuate year to year, and the sample in this round exceeded the NSC benchmark in both of these high school categories by larger amounts than in previous years.
The results are not encouraging but given the national landscape also not surprising. Just two of 37 programs in our sample with students from both classes saw their first-fall enrollment rate increase in 2020. Among the programs that saw declines, the average percent change was -15.4%, and five programs saw decreases greater than 20%.

Despite that, Figure 4 shows that 25 of 37 member programs still had a first-fall enrollment rate higher than the NSCRC’s national benchmark of 56.5%. This speaks to the earlier hypothesis that memberserved students had high outcomes but were more prone to disruption in their postsecondary pathways. The consequence is that NCAN member programs went from greatly exceeding national enrollment rate benchmarks to mostly just edging them out for the class of 2020.

Figure 4. First Fall Enrollment Rate by Member Program

Figure 5 puts NCAN member programs’ success in a different light by adding three pieces of context:

- The figure shows NCAN member program first-fall enrollment rates by the percentage of non-White students served.
- The marks are weighted by the percentage of first-generation students, with larger marks representing higher percentages.
- The marks’ colors correspond to the percentage of students from low-income high schools, with more orange marks representing higher percentages.

As expected, the majority of NCAN member programs in the sample are serving significant percentages of students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Students of color comprised 70% or more of 28 of 37 programs in the sample. Seventeen programs were comprised of 70% or more first-generation students, and 16 programs had 70% or more of their students coming from low-income high schools. In these contexts, and understanding that students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color face numerous challenges and obstacles on their postsecondary pathway, and even more so in the COVID-19 era, the postsecondary outcomes these member-served students achieved are all the more impressive.

Narrowing the comparison strictly to students from low-income high schools and high-minority high schools, the results are more positive for NCAN members and the students they serve. Figures 6 and 7 show that just four programs in the sample fell below the NSCRC fall enrollment benchmark for these high school categories.
Figure 6. First Fall Enrollment Rate by Member Program (Low-Income High Schools)

First Fall Enrollment Rate

NSCRC Benchmark - 47.2%
EXAMINING SECOND-YEAR PERSISTENCE

Although this brief largely focuses on high school graduates from the class of 2020, enrollment outcomes are not the only ones of interest. NCAN members have made clear that COVID-19 also impacted the retention and persistence of currently enrolled students. Graduates from the class of 2019 who immediately enrolled following high school would have been in their second year during the 2020-21 academic year.

The NSCRC’s High School Benchmarks report did consider first-fall enrollment, but unfortunately, the series has not yet considered persistence outcomes for the high school class of 2019 (or any other class). From previous editions of the NSCRC’s High School Benchmarks report, we can get a three-year rolling average of second-year persistence rates by high school category. These appear below in Figure 8.
NCAN’s class of 2019 persistence rate is lower than the NSC composite in every category. This is discouraging, but it is important to remember that the NSC has not yet released its national class of 2019 second-year persistence benchmark. Given the class of 2020’s enrollment rate outcomes, it is almost certain that the class of 2019’s persistence outcomes dipped nationally. This means that Figure 8 may overstate the gap between member-served students’ persistence outcomes and those of their peers, holding graduating class constant.

**FIRST POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION ATTENDED**

Nearly as important as whether students matriculate is where they matriculate. Completion rates vary widely across institution types (and within them as well). Generally, four-year institutions have higher completion rates than two-year institutions. Given NCAN’s attainment focus and that of our members, where students’ postsecondary pathways begin is of high interest.

Figure 9 below shows the first type of institution attended for the classes of 2019 and 2020. The figures here are remarkably consistent. Of member-served students in the sample who matriculated, more than half in each year attend a four-year public institution. About a quarter attend a community
college, and the remainder attended a private, nonprofit four-year institution. All other institution types comprise less than 1% of matriculations in each year.

Figure 9. First Postsecondary Institution Type Attended by NCAN Member-Served Students, Classes of 2019 and 2020

**PRACTICE PROFILES**

*These profiles highlight NCAN member programs that achieved significant positive outcomes for their students in the Benchmarking Project.*

**FULFILLMENT FUND (LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA)**

At Fulfillment Fund, we take an individualistic and holistic approach when it comes to counseling and advising our students. We introduce Fulfillment Fund services to students when they're in ninth grade. Our college access team provides intensive one-on-one college counseling, college trips, college application workshops, financial aid workshops, and many other resources we feel they need to prepare for their college life. In doing so, we establish strong relationships with them.

While our students are still in high school, the transition from our college access team to the college success team begins. We start with an orientation toward the end of 12th grade, which we call Fulfillment Fund University. This provides our students with all the resources and support they need to freeze summer melt. While they're in college, we offer academic, financial aid, and career advising. We
are also able to provide scholarships to many of our students. In addition, we provide career and professional development webinars, along with exclusive internship opportunities.

Furthermore, we provide peer mentoring in 10 different colleges and universities. We have upperclassmen mentor underclassmen. Our peer mentors are able to create a Fulfillment Fund community on their college campus. Ninety-six percent of our 2019-20 peer mentees are persisting. What’s more, four of those students are now peer mentors themselves!

We are excited to continue to be innovative and find the most effective ways to serve our students.

I KNOW I CAN (COLUMBUS, OHIO)

In March 2020, I Know I Can, like many of our college access peers, was startled into a new service model. Specifically, the IKIC team flipped its service delivery to online advising to ensure high school students continued to meet milestones related to the college admission and financial aid processes. Much of our transition to online advising occurred quickly. The IKIC team created Zoom accounts, GoogleVoice phone numbers, and a digital and distance outreach schedule within the first two weeks of school closures. We narrowed our program priorities to focus on preventing COVID melt and COVID slide for the students we serve. This required adapting our services to include live, online, group and one-on-one sessions; text message campaigns; recorded presentations on YouTube; the creation of new outreach campaigns so families and students knew how to access services; and serving as a primary partner in the creation of Learning Extension Centers, or locations in our neighborhoods where students could drop in and receive in-person advising services.

During the summer months, IKIC collaborated with our college partners to bolster summer melt programming for college-ready students. In addition to institution-specific online events, IKIC advisors completed personalized outreach regarding next steps and important COVID updates.

Conclusion

NCAN members and the students and families they serve are no strangers to crisis. Every year students run into seemingly insurmountable challenges on the path to a postsecondary credential. Gaps in financial aid, FAFSA verification, difficulty getting to campuses, personal and family exigencies that change plans, and more all derail countless students. The college attainment field has long been a reliable bulwark against these crises; advisers and program staff jump in to help students stay on the postsecondary pathways to which they aspire.

This brief’s data show that even in the face of a much, much larger crisis, the NCAN members who submitted their data made heroic efforts to keep students on those pathways. They did so at a rate higher than the national average while serving students systematically more negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its wide-ranging and pernicious effects.

Substantial work remains for our field and our country to help students. The class of 2020 saw sizable postsecondary enrollment declines, and those students will need new on-ramps back into the
postsecondary system. The same goes for previous classes’ students who were already enrolled and then stopped out. Looking forward, it is likely that the high school class of 2021 will also see enrollment declines, giving leading indicators like FAFSA completions and the number of college applications submitted. Looking even further ahead, college and career readiness supports for students from the classes of 2022, 2023, and 2024 have all likely been disrupted across the country.

The work of providing students with the additional knowledge and support they need to access a postsecondary pathway has never been more important or more needed. This brief demonstrates that, provided those supports and that knowledge, NCAN member-served students can surmount the obstacles in front of them in their pursuit for a better future through postsecondary education.

**METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center examined the enrollment patterns of three NCAN cohorts following their high school graduation (2014, 2019, and 2020). For each cohort year, the Research Center tracked each student’s enrollment progress starting with the first-fall semester after high school graduation through the fall semester of 2020. At the time of student matching, fall 2020 was the most recent data available to the Clearinghouse. The first year after high school graduation for each cohort was separated into a fall and spring semester, while all other academic years were not. The number of graduates submitted by each of the 42 NCAN participating programs varied from less than 100 graduates to over 5,000. In addition, while all NCAN participants submitted at least one 2020 graduate, only 39 programs submitted students from the 2019 cohort. Considering the discrepancy among submitted students from each cohort, larger programs have a larger impact on the aggregate results than smaller programs.

NCAN removed five programs from the sample considered by this brief. Four programs were removed because the member programs alerted NCAN to significant discrepancies between the data returned to them from the NSCRC and their own records that they felt misrepresented their programs’ actual outcomes. A fifth program was removed because a 99% decrease in student enrollment from 2019 to 2020 signaled an error in data submission or matching with the NSC’s records. In total, the final sample for this brief covers 47,498 students across three high school graduating classes.

**APPENDIX: BENCHMARKS BY GENDER, RACE, ETHNICITY, AND FIRST-GENERATION STATUS**

NCAN’s Benchmarking Project is currently one of just two large-sample studies of the postsecondary outcomes of students served by college access and success programs.4 Since the first round of NCAN’s Benchmarking Project, its significant value has been providing enrollment, persistence, and

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4 The other, the College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium (CCREC) managed by the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) focuses on the activities and outcomes of students served by GEAR UP state grant projects.
completion estimates against which NCAN member programs and other organizations can compare themselves.

NCAN has produced an interactive dashboard to generate tables that display first-fall and/or first-year enrollment estimates for the high school classes of 2019 and 2020 and six-year completion rates for the high school class of 2014. These benchmarks are disaggregated by student gender, race, ethnicity, and first-generation status.

In an environment where organizations urgently want and need to know how well they are serving students, these benchmarks will give them a sense of how they are performing relative to a large sample of their peers.