



**National
College
Access
Network**

Building Connections. Advancing Equity. Promoting Success.

First Release: September 2017
Updated: January 2018

Closing the College
Graduation Gap

2017 National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report

Writer:

Bill DeBaun, Director of Data and Evaluation

Contributor:

Allie Ciaramella, Communications Manager

Sara Melnick, Deputy Director

© 2017 National College Access Network. All rights reserved.

Washington, DC

www.collegeaccess.org

Introduction and Summary of Findings

The college access and success field has continued to adapt to an increasingly data-driven world. NCAN member organizations use data for continuous improvement, to demonstrate impact, and to be accountable for the support they receive from funders and the trust they earn from students and their families. While members consider their own impact, NCAN considers that of our members in our field.

This report, the fourth in a series, represents the result of a strong collaboration between the National College Access Network (NCAN) and our members to examine our successes and stumbles. We tell members that Rome was not built in a day, and neither will their data and evaluation capacity; incremental improvements are important for moving our performance and insights ahead. This year's Benchmarking Project adds a number of critical variables for analysis, including the characteristics of both the high schools students attended and those of their first postsecondary institution.

Round 4's findings should be encouraging for members and all stakeholders in our field. Students served by members participating in this round of the Benchmarking Project continue to enroll in college at rates exceeding their peers, and thanks to new national benchmarks from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), we can demonstrate that even more clearly. The completion gap between the average student in the benchmarking sample and overall national comparisons is wider than in previous years, but holding constant high school income and minority characteristics, member-served students complete at much higher rates than their peers.

Holding constant high school income and minority characteristics, member-served students complete at much higher rates than their peers.

The data in this brief represent evidence that NCAN and its members are making strides toward closing attainment gaps for underrepresented students. Members should be heartened over the traction our field is gaining while also being mindful that there is always more ground to cover and there are always more students whose lives could change for the better with the support of our time, attention, and effort.

Data Source and Methodology

NCAN and the NSCRC have been partners on the Benchmarking Project since its inception. The NSCRC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to using data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) database to inform educators and policymakers

about students' educational pathways and outcomes. The NSC is a 501(c)(6) organization that collects information on enrollment and degree completion from 3,600 higher education institutions covering 98 percent of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States.

The 65 organizations participating in Round 4 of the Benchmarking Project submitted data on over 170,000 students. As more organizations participate, we move closer to a representative sample of both NCAN member programs and students served by these programs, and the results become more generalizable to the broader NCAN membership. However, methodological challenges to account for the broad diversity in member shapes and sizes do persist. In future rounds, we hope to engage even more member organizations and move closer to a more perfect understanding of our impact on our field's mission of increasing college access and success for students. We hope individual organizations are pursuing a similar understanding about their own work.

The NCAN members that participated in the Benchmarking Project submitted student-level data through the NSC's StudentTracker service, and the NSCRC aggregated these data to create enrollment and completion rates for students served by the 65 member programs. These data included high school graduates from the classes of 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2015. Members' submitted data were used to match students with information from the NSC on students' enrollment and completion statuses for the years following high school graduation in addition to, for the first time, the characteristics of the postsecondary institution at which a student first enrolled. NCAN members also submitted information on students' demographics and services received. These additional data allow for an analysis that dives deeper for insights that benefit the entire NCAN member population. Appendix A contains a full list of variables collected in the Benchmarking Project.

This report provides college enrollment and completion rate benchmarks for students based on gender, race/ethnicity, Hispanic background, and first-generation status. Thanks to the expanded data collection in Round 4 as well as additional national benchmarks available from the NSCRC, we look forward to releasing regular Benchmarking Breakdowns and other briefs throughout the year to illuminate enrollment patterns, persistence rates, and the correlation of various combinations of programmatic interventions on student outcomes.

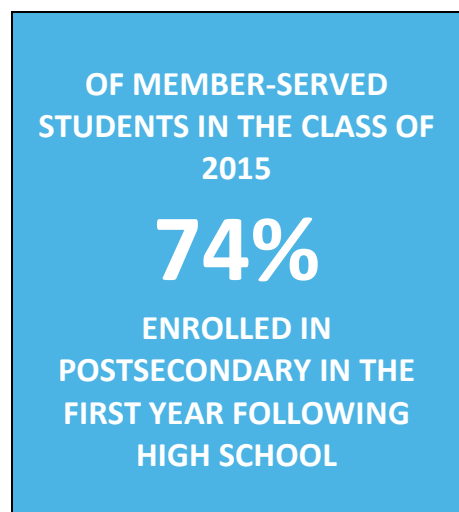
Postsecondary Enrollment – Overall

Data from the 65 members participating in Round 4 of the Benchmarking Project show a 73.7-percent enrollment rate in the first year following high school graduation across the entire sample of more than 170,000 students and four high school graduating classes (2010, 2011, 2012, and 2015). The first-year enrollment rate for the class of 2015 specifically – the most recent examined by this round of the project – was also 73.7 percent. Notably, this is the first time this study has captured a full-year window for its most recent graduating class. Previous reports’ most recent graduating classes only captured fall semester enrollments.

We report the “first-year enrollment” metric for three reasons:

- First, it is a metric provided by the NSCRC in its annual High School Benchmark Reports (along with “first fall enrollment”).
- Second, the college access and success literature demonstrates that enrollment immediately following high school graduation, especially in the first semester, is most associated with student success, but failing that, first-year is preferable to delayed enrollment.
- Third, this is an outcome tracked by many NCAN members, and reporting it here allows these programs to benchmark their performance.

The first-year enrollment rates for the other graduating classes in the sample did not meaningfully vary from the overall average (2010: 73.6%; 2011: 74.6%; 2012: 73.0%).

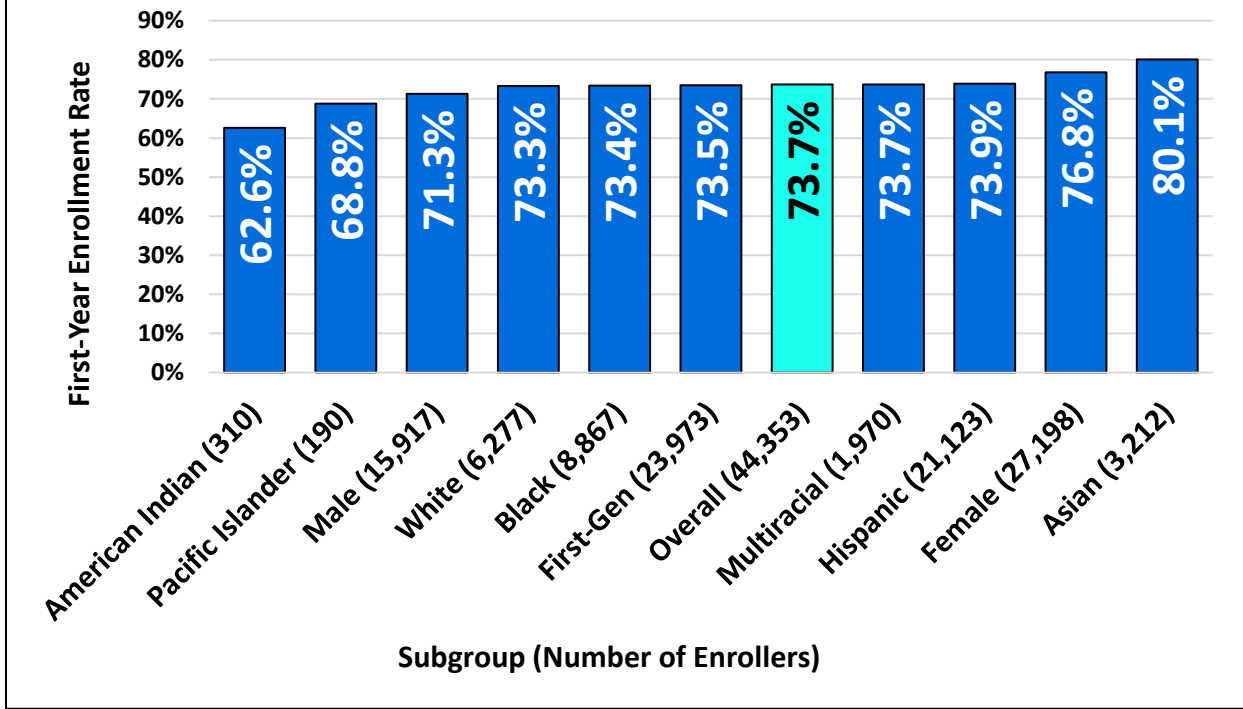


Postsecondary Enrollment – By Student Characteristics

It is important to disaggregate data by student characteristics, as this will often reveal attainment gaps that may not be obvious when looking at aggregated data. As in the past, this report will disaggregate both enrollment and completion outcomes by student characteristics. Figure 1 displays first-year enrollment rates for the class of 2015 overall and by subgroup (students with unknown gender and race/ethnicity are omitted). NCAN members can

compare their performance to these enrollment rates, which represent a large sample of other member-served students. Cross-tabulations of various organization- and student-level characteristics and outcomes are available to members from NCAN upon request.

Figure 1. First-Year Enrollment Rates, By Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and First-Generation Status, NCAN Class of 2015



With some exceptions, most student groups from the class of 2015 had first-year enrollment rates comparable to the class’s overall first-year enrollment rate. As in previous rounds of the Benchmarking Project, female students and Asian students enrolled at the highest rates, and American Indian and Pacific Islander groups enrolled at the lowest rates. The latter two groups, again as in previous rounds, have by far the lowest sample size and these results should be considered with caution. As in Round 3, Hispanic students enrolled at rates higher than any racial or ethnic group except for Asian students, while also being the largest subgroup. This is encouraging and indicates that member-served Hispanic students are accessing postsecondary education at scale.

Postsecondary Enrollment Comparisons

Overall and disaggregated first-year enrollment rates established, we turn to putting these rates into a national context. The NSCRC provides annually updated national benchmarks for enrollment and completion, and the most recent High School Benchmarks Report includes first fall enrollment benchmarks disaggregated by 12 separate categories of high schools based on geographic location, percentage of

minority students enrolled, and family income level (based on student receipt of free and reduced-price lunch).¹

The High School Benchmarks 2016 report was the NSCRC's first to provide enrollment-rate benchmarks for specific groups of high schools within one variable rather than across multiple variables (e.g., "low-income schools", "high-minority schools", "urban schools" this year versus "low-income, high-minority, urban" schools in previous years). In this report, we use these data, along with members' reporting for the first time the characteristics of high schools attended by their students, to compare member-served students' enrollment rates and national enrollment rates, by high school category. This comparison appears in Figure 3.

The NSCRC categorizes students' high schools in a variety of ways:

- **Low-income high schools** have a proportion of students on free or reduced-price lunch that is 50 percent or greater. **Higher-income schools'** proportion of students on free or reduced-price lunch is less than 50 percent.
- **High-poverty schools** have a proportion of students on free or reduced-price lunch that is 75 percent or greater. **Low-poverty schools'** proportion of students on free or reduced-price is 25 percent or less.
- **High-minority schools** have student populations that are 40 percent or greater Black or Hispanic.
- The National Center for Education Statistics defines high schools' locales.

Although NCAN made members aware of these guidelines, there is a possibility that members did not abide by these parameters when reporting high school data for their students. We derive the NCAN benchmarks by high school category from a subset of participating programs and students. Of the 65 programs participating in Round 4, 35 programs submitted data on high school categories. These 35 programs covered 87 percent of the students in the Round 4 sample. Figure 2 breaks down these characteristics, as reported by members for students from the Class of 2015.

¹ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016). High School Benchmarks 2016: National College Progression Rates. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks-2016-national-college-progression-rates/>

Figure 2. Reported High School Characteristics of Member-Served Students in the Class of 2015

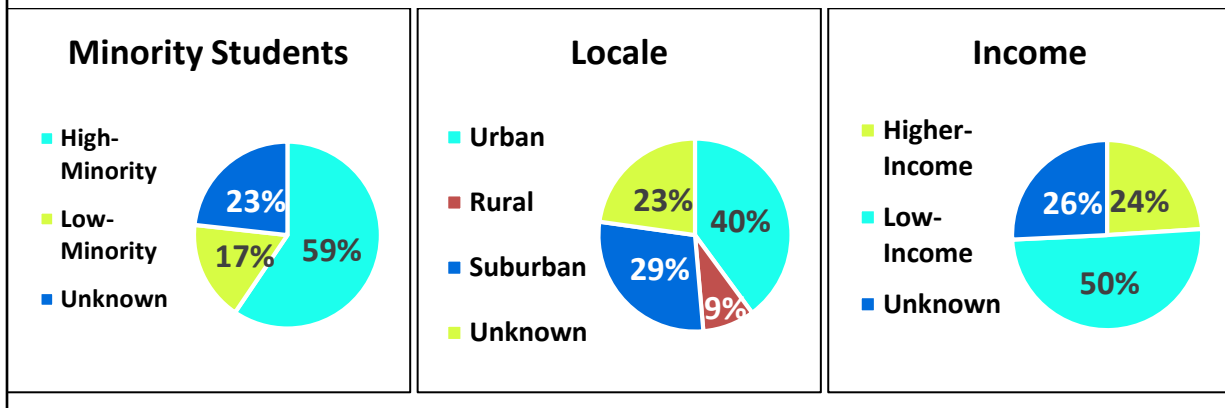
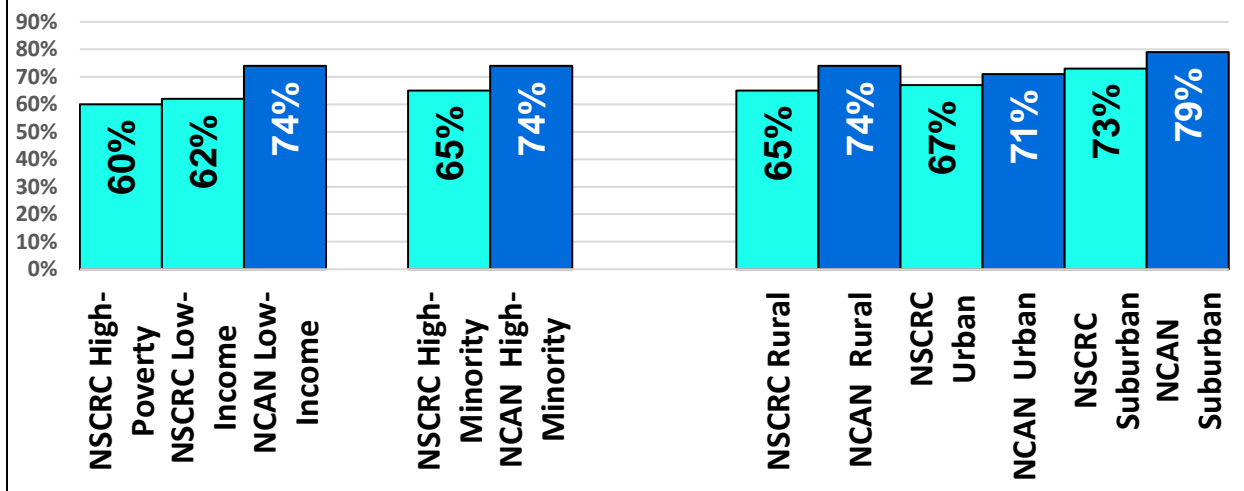


Figure 3 compares NCAN and NSCRC enrollment benchmarks, and it should be extremely encouraging for NCAN members and the college access and success field overall.

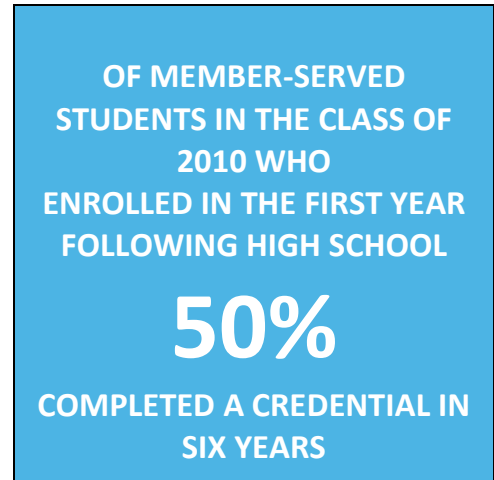
Figure 3. National Student Clearinghouse (First Fall) and National College Access Network (First Year) Enrollment



NCAN member-served students' first-year postsecondary enrollment rates exceed comparable income, minority, and locale benchmarks across the board. The NCAN Class of 2015 overall first-year enrollment rate of 73.7 percent also compares favorably against the various better-resourced high school categories. Students from the NSCRC's low poverty and higher income high school categories enrolled at rates of 76 percent and 69 percent, respectively.

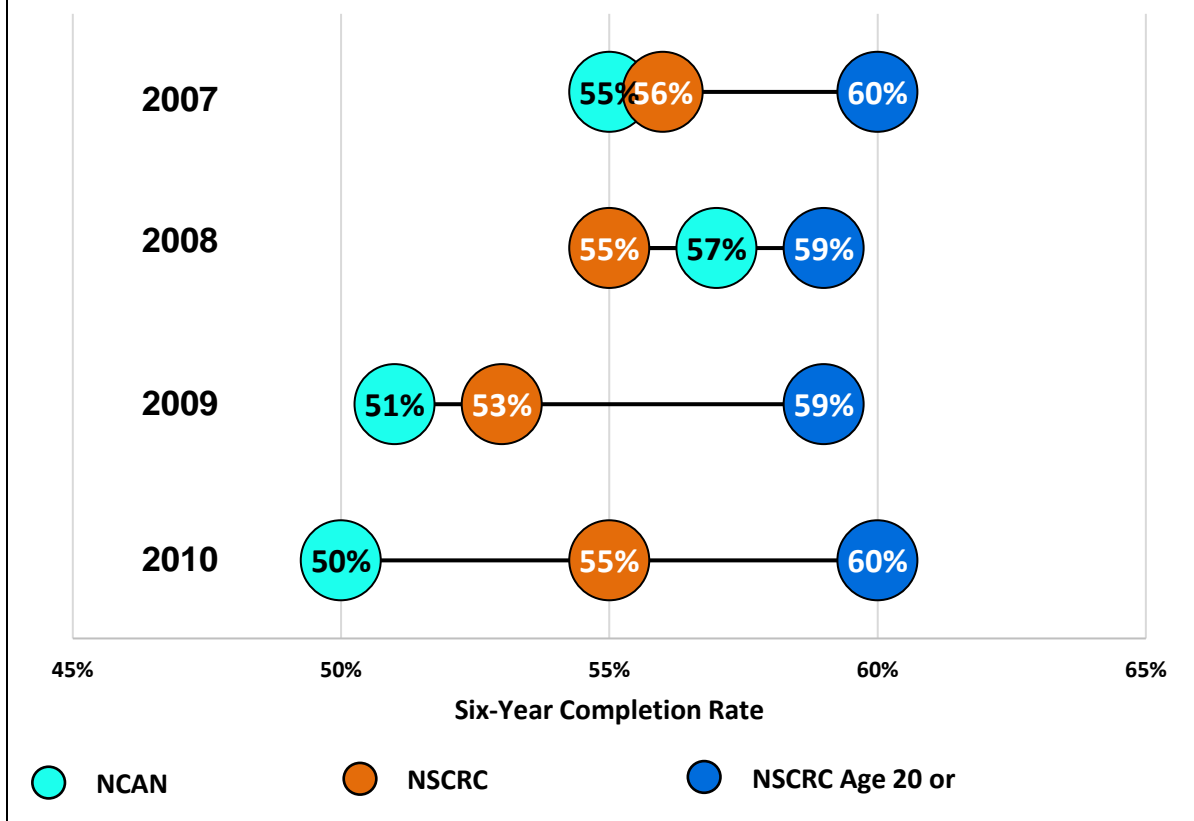
Postsecondary Completion – Overall

Over the past decade, our field has turned attention and resources to student success as well as access. Many NCAN members have expanded their program offerings to serve students into, through, and even beyond their postsecondary experience. NCAN considers the six-year completion rate of the most recent graduating class to be the most relevant comparison for members, given postsecondary data collection and reporting practices. In this report we consider the completion outcomes of students from the high school class of 2010. Member-served students in this class who enrolled in the first year following high school had a 49.6-percent completion rate. This is down slightly from the class of 2009's six-year completion rate of 51.3 percent, reported in NCAN's Benchmarking Report 2015. The overall six-year completion rate for all member-served students in the class of 2010, regardless of when or whether they ever enrolled, was 38 percent.



NCAN now has six-year completion rates for students from four high school graduating classes: 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. Figure 4 compares these data to the NSCRC's Signature Reports, showing the relative distance of the NCAN benchmark to national benchmarks over these four years. Two NSCRC benchmarks are included: an overall six-year completion rate of students who first enrolled in the given year, and a completion rate for those who were 20 or younger upon first enrollment. The latter is likely the most appropriate benchmark to use, given that we know most programs participating in the Benchmarking Project are serving high school students. In the past two years, the NCAN completion rate has moved further from the national completion rate. As more programs and students have been included in the NCAN data set, we surmise that this has moved the completion rate closer to the true average outcome for students receiving NCAN member services. Significant year-to-year change in the sample of programs submitting data is a key reason we do not consider the NCAN completion rates longitudinally. The comparison to the NSCRC benchmarks over time is discouraging. Although we demonstrate below that NCAN members have been successful in narrowing the completion gap for the students they serve compared to their students' peers, the gap between the completion rates of member-served students and national benchmarks remains substantial: about 10 percentage points for the most recent six-year window.

Figure 4. NCAN, NSCRC Overall, and NSCRC Age 20 or Younger Six-Year Completion Rate Comparison, Classes of 2007-2010



Completion Rates by High School Characteristics

When examining data, context is key. The completion data in Figure 4 indicate that students served by NCAN members still face considerable unique challenges to completion of a credential or degree. The average outcomes of students nationally are an aspirational but ultimately dissimilar comparison, given that the average student nationally does not face the same challenges as member-served students.

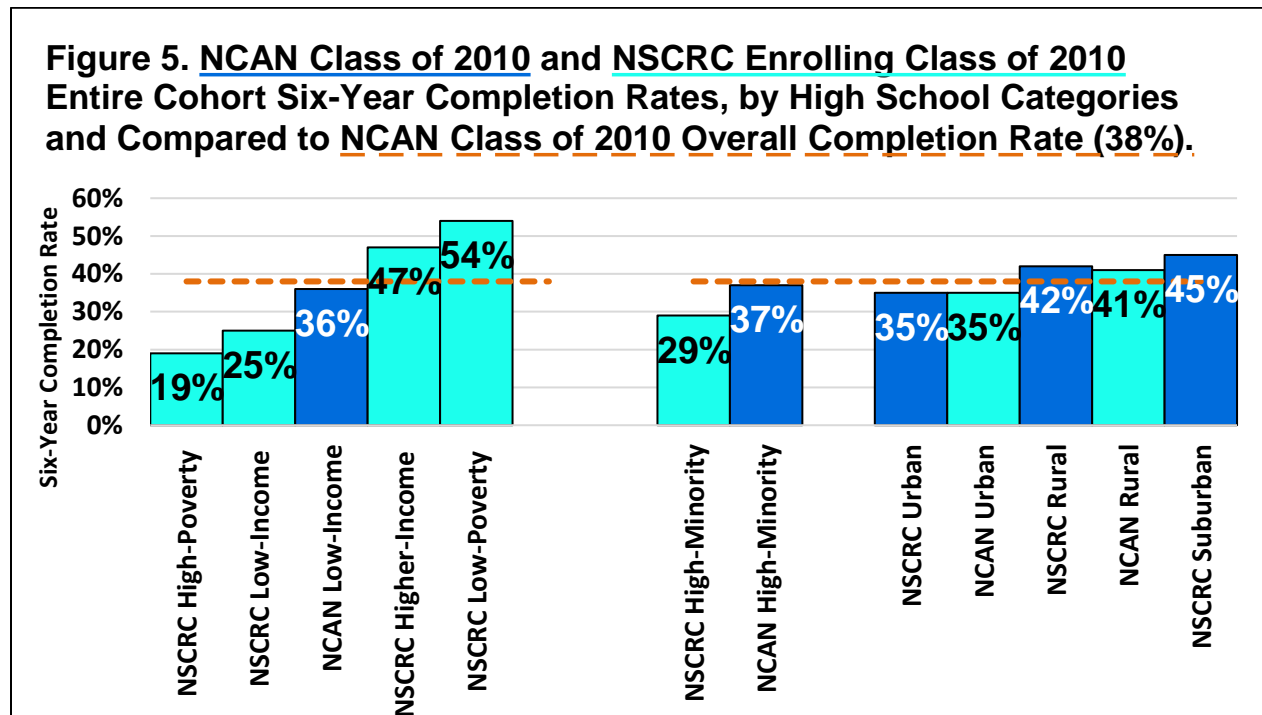
A more relevant comparison can be drawn between the completion rates of NCAN member-served students and those from a range of high school categories. Figure 5

NCAN member-served students outperform their peers from high poverty, high minority, and low income high schools, but trail students from higher income and low poverty high schools.

compares students from NCAN’s graduating class of 2010 to the NSCRC’s enrolling class of 2010, within high school categories. Completion rates in Figure 5 are for all students in the high school graduating class, regardless of when or whether they enrolled in the six years following high school. These completion rates of the entire cohort are lower compared to those of students who enrolled in the first year following high school. As mentioned above, not all programs provided high school category data; therefore, the NCAN high school category benchmarks below are derived from a smaller number of programs and represent fewer

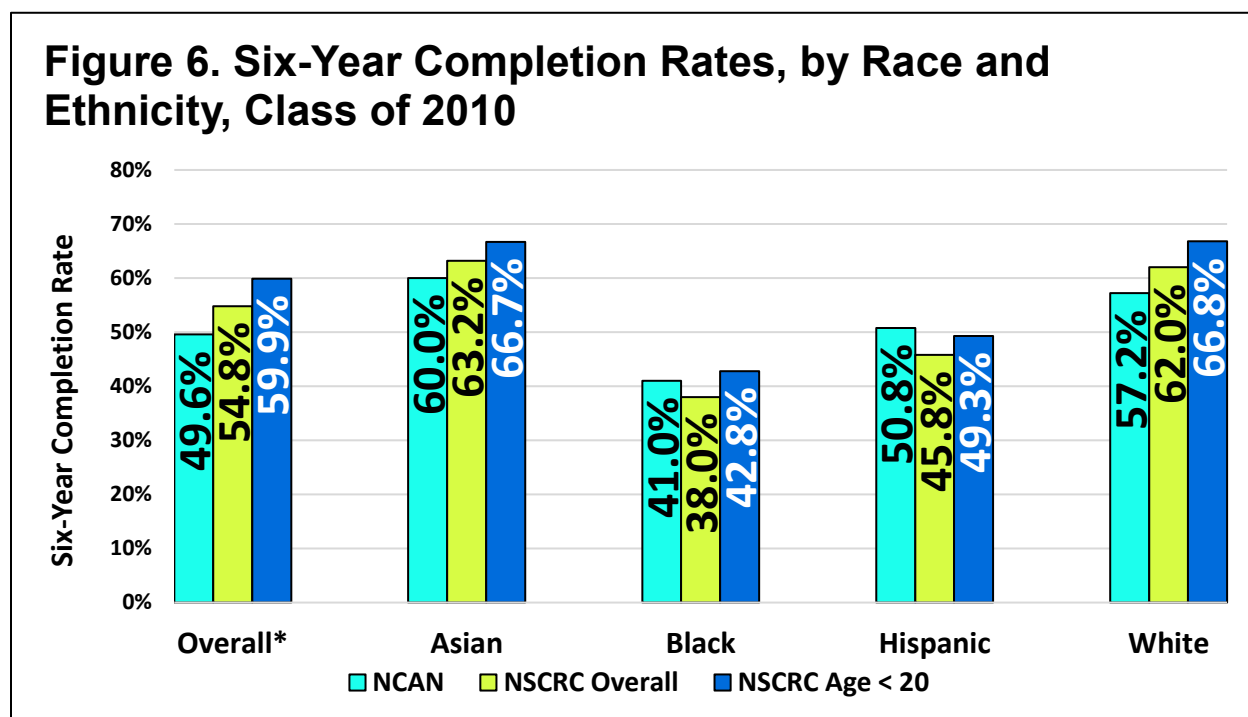
students than the 38-percent completion rate of the entire NCAN class of 2010 noted earlier.

NCAN member-served students outperform their peers from high-poverty, high-minority, and low-income high schools, but trail students from higher-income and low-poverty high schools. Comparing within high school locale, member-served students complete at rates approximately equal to national benchmarks.



Completion Rates by Student Race and Ethnicity

In spring 2017, the NSCRC released the first in another series of valuable national benchmarks: completion rates by student race and ethnicity. This inaugural set of benchmarks, which includes students who first enrolled in the fall of 2010, provides a good comparison to the NCAN completion rate of students who graduated in 2010 and enrolled in their first year following high school. Figure 6 compares the six-year completion rates of NCAN member-served students, NSCRC students overall, and NSCRC students who were 20 or younger upon first enrollment. The results are again encouraging for NCAN members: The overall NCAN completion rate of 49.6 percent lags the national benchmark, but Black and Hispanic students served by members complete at rates higher than the national average. These students also either approach or exceed completion rates of students 20 or younger upon entry. Member-served White and Asian students trail both the overall and age-20-or-younger national averages, but their completion rates exceed the national six-year rate of 54.8 percent.



*NSC Overall Completion Rates from NSCRC Signature Report 12 (December 2016)², Completion Rates by Race/Ethnicity from April 2017 Supplement³. NCAN completion rates based on students who began postsecondary education in the first year following high school. NSC completion rates based on students who began postsecondary education in fall 2010.

² Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A. & Hwang, Y. (2016). Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates – Fall 2010 Cohort (Signature Report No. 12). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

³ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P., Yuan, X., Nathan, A & Hwang, Y., A. (2017, April). Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort (Signature Report No. 12b). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Conclusion

The word “encourage” appears in various forms repeatedly throughout this report. That is not incidental. Encouragement is at the heart of the college access and success field. NCAN members tell students that college *is* for students like them, they *can* complete that application, and they *will* attend and complete that college degree. It is our hope at NCAN that our measurement of members’ impact through the Benchmarking Project serves as a similar kind of encouragement. The students served by NCAN members face unique challenges, and obstacles undoubtedly exist in our own work. Despite this, the latest round of the Benchmarking Project, the resulting data in this report, and upcoming briefs showing our progress in even more indicators should encourage members that we are moving in the right direction. Student success both *is* and *is for* our field. NCAN looks forward to moving further in this direction with our members and all other stakeholders vested in our students’ futures.

Acknowledgments

NCAN is grateful to the staff of the National Student Clearinghouse and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center for their work in documenting student outcomes. We are particularly grateful to Jill Indugula, Joshua Leake-Campbell, Katie Mason, Angela Tobin, and Louisa Caldrony for their efforts related to data collection and analysis. Additionally, we are grateful to the 65 member programs who submitted student data for this round of the Benchmarking Project, as well as the broader membership for their interest in, and support of, documenting the enrollment and completion impacts of the field.

Appendix A: Benchmarking Project Variables

Student-identifying variables

- First name
- Last name
- Date of birth
- High school graduating year

Demographic variables

- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- First-generation status (according to program's definition)
- Program selectivity (does the program serve all students or restrict participation based on financial and/or academic criteria)
- Pell Grant recipient
- Scholarship recipient from the program in student's first postsecondary year
- Income level (high/low/unknown) of high school predominantly attended
- Minority level (high/low/unknown) of high school predominantly attended
- Location (rural/suburban/urban) of high school predominantly attended

Service variables

- Assistance in completing and submitting the FAFSA
- Financial literacy/aid education
- Academic support/counseling/advising while in high school
- College admissions test prep courses and/or materials; postsecondary admissions counseling
- Specific curriculum and/or activities designed to encourage grit, persistence, non-cognitive, other social/emotional/life skills
- Provide information to parents/families
- Success/completion/retention services while in postsecondary education
- Services promoting college and career readiness, including development of workforce skills and knowledge

NSCRC-provided variables

- Postsecondary Year 1 through Year 6 outcome variables (not matched, stopped out, initially enrolled, continued enrollment, earned certificate, earned associate's, earned bachelor's)
- Sector of first postsecondary institution attended (public/private)
- Type of first postsecondary institution attended (two-year/four-year)
- For-profit status of first postsecondary institution attended (for-profit/nonprofit)