

Improving the First-Year Retention Rate for Students in the U.S

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Background

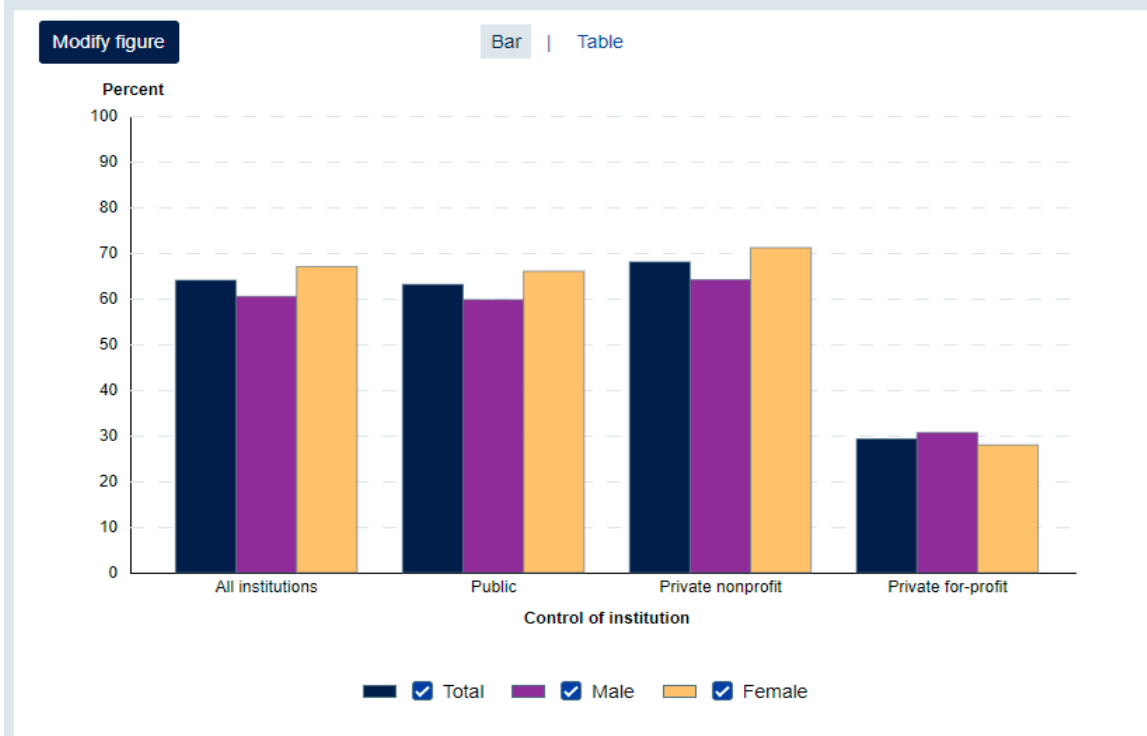
For many Americans, attending college and obtaining a 4-year degree is a vital key to achieving the "American Dream" and finding success in life. Attaining a college degree is a powerful tool that allows students to invest in their own human capital and opens a vast quantity of opportunities that would not be feasible for them otherwise. For example, those with bachelor's degree are likely to earn a median of \$64,896 over the course of their career compared to \$38,792 for those with only a high school diploma.³

Although it's a common sentiment that enrolling in a higher education is important for our younger and future generation of students, we still have much to improve on in regards to our college graduation rates that would empower more students with the opportunities they need within the workforce. An example of this would be how our post-secondary attainment rate for those over the age of 25 is only 48% compared to our neighboring country of Canada who has a rate of 59% as of 2019.⁶ Furthermore, if we were to examine Arizona's post-secondary attainment rate among the cohort of 2015 high school graduates over the course of 6 years, then only 27.4% had completed a 2-year or 4-year degree after graduating. These trends then indicate that only "only 16.8 percent of today's ninth graders will graduate from a four-year college by 2029."¹⁵ Our college completion rate as seen here is much lower than what many would deem acceptable by most people today when considering the benefits of a college degree. This is particularly true when considering how 65% of jobs in the U.S in 2020 required a post-secondary education of some kind compared to 59% in 2010.¹⁰

Perhaps the most jarring fact of all this is how the majority of students who do decide to attend college after high school, inevitably drop out during their first year (often called

“freshman year” in US schools). For example, the national average freshman retention rate for 2019 was only 67.14% while the retention rate in Arizona was even lower than that at 62.25%.⁹ This illuminates the fact that there are many barriers that first-time students face when first attending college during their first years that prevents them from continuing their education. As such, an important goal if we want to raise the number of students who do enter the workforce with a 4-year degree is to address the issues that so many college freshmen face.

Figure 3. Graduation rate within 150 percent of normal time (within 6 years) for degree completion from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by control of institution and sex: Cohort entry year 2014



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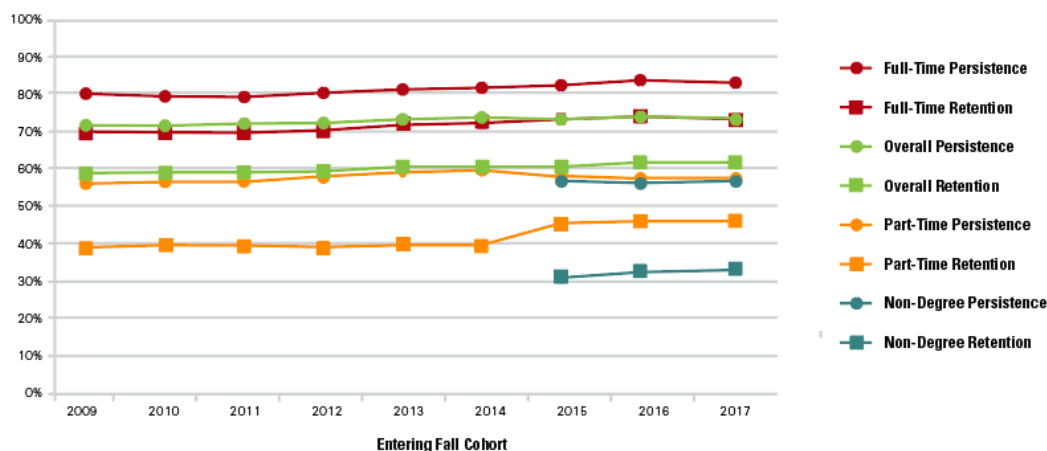
Retention of Part Time Students

When examining college retention rates, another key group of students to examine is part-time students; students who enroll in less than 12 credits per semester. Higher education institutions particularly struggle, and fail, in accommodating this large minority group of

students. Over recent decades, the college completion rate in the U.S has substantially improved compared to how it has been in the past. This success has not only accompanied traditional students from middle- and upper-class families, but those from poorer backgrounds and varying ethnicities as well. However, one group that has been lagging behind are those students who are only able to attend school part time. This group of students are often the ones most likely to not finish their degree and drop out of school for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include the lack of accommodations that may ease students into college, lack of preparedness, and no reliable confidants among faculty members among other reasons. This therefore presents an issue that must be addressed if we want to help the millions of students that are within this group.

As the focal point of this report is analyzing the importance of freshman retention rate and how it can raise overall college completion among students, we can ascertain that this especially affects part time students. Generally, part-time students have had abysmally low freshman retention rate throughout the country. For example, the national retention rate for part time students in 2009 was 42% and only increased to 42.3% 10 years later in 2019.⁹ This is also even true for universities such as ASU, who typically boasts a higher freshman retention rate of 86.7% in 2019, but only 40.2% for part time students during the same year.¹³ If we were to examine how we may be able to raise the overall freshman retention rate that can aid all students alike; whether full-time or part-time students, then there must be programs implemented that prevent students from dropping out for reasons that are controllable by the schools.

Figure 1. First-Year Persistence and Retention by Starting Enrollment Intensity, All Institutions, 2009-2017



		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Full-Time	Persistence	80.0%	79.7%	79.5%	80.3%	81.4%	81.6%	82.8%	83.5%	82.8%
	Retention	69.9%	69.7%	69.6%	70.3%	71.9%	72.3%	73.8%	73.9%	73.5%
Overall	Persistence	71.6%	71.6%	71.7%	72.4%	73.4%	73.6%	73.4%	73.9%	73.9%
	Retention	59.0%	59.1%	59.1%	59.4%	60.5%	60.8%	61.1%	61.6%	61.7%
Part-Time	Persistence	56.2%	56.8%	57.0%	58.0%	59.1%	59.5%	58.6%	57.7%	57.9%
	Retention	39.2%	39.6%	39.5%	39.5%	39.9%	39.9%	45.7%	45.9%	46.1%
Non-Degree	Persistence							56.7%	56.0%	57.0%
	Retention							31.0%	32.4%	33.2%

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<https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport35-first-year-persistence-and-retention/>

Student Engagement

There are many different ideas and methods in which we may improve the freshman retention rate at our universities. For this report, I will examine how a student’s engagement at school may play an important role in keeping them retained. Student engagement is a broad term that can be interpreted in many ways, but for this report student engagement will be defined as the level of activity students are involved in utilizing school resources like tutoring centers, involvement in extracurriculars, and interactions they have with fellow peers and faculty members. As such, one way student engagement can be quantified is the number of student organizations and clubs offered at the school, number of student resource centers or facilities for tutoring, career preparedness resources, number of students involved in extracurriculars, and

much more. These types of programs to promote student engagement may play a vital role in assimilating students to life during college and may ease their transition from secondary education to higher education. This assimilation can therefore aid students throughout their freshman year and as such will allow them to be more likely to transition into their sophomore years as well instead of dropping out. Furthermore, this is especially true for part-time students who are the ones to be least likely involved in school and extracurricular activities. However, by implementing programs and methods that will encourage their engagement at school that cater towards their needs, we may be able to improve their overall learning experience and therefore improve the odds of them completing college.

Interactions in School-Wide Events

Some specific factors that influence a student's willingness to complete college are the social and environmental aspects that are a part of attending a university. This can take the form of friendly social interactions between the students and faculty members that establishes a sense of community within the school for the students. A very obvious method of increasing student engagement is the addition and encouragement of various extracurricular activities at school outside of the classroom. Events such as football or basketball games are often excellent events in encouraging interactions among students and raises the overall attachment to the college in the form of school spirit. Other events such as cultural fairs and music festivals can also foster a sense of community among the student body and push students to further engage in on campus activities that they otherwise wouldn't have. The advertisements of such events at school whether via social media or by professors themselves can raise the awareness and thus the active participation in these events by students. These types of events can also be very effective for

students who only attend schools part time or commuters who may only go to campus to attend class instead of partaking in extracurricular activities that may be available.

Seminars and Learning Cohorts

In conjunction with the social extracurriculars that were previously mentioned, specific seminars or learning cohorts can be developed that cater to more distinct groups of students such as Latinos of whom tend to have a lower freshman retention rate. This is particularly true of the learning communities available at Bunker Hill Community College where 65% of their student population are either African-Americans or Hispanic.² These types of learning communities take the form of seminars and learning clusters that group students together with coaches with the aim of supporting them and guiding them throughout the semester. Students would typically take seminars where their coaches would work alongside their instructors in helping to build a roadmap for their students alongside addressing any personal issues they may have. These types of practices have bore fruit for part-time students where the retention rate for those who were a part of these learning communities boasted a first-year retention rate of 75% compared to those who didn't at 60% in 2017. These types of seminars haven't just been effective at Bunker Hill either, seminars held for first-year students are also considered as a high impact strategy in aiding students through their freshman year as noted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.¹⁴ By having such programs, these colleges may be able to examine what issues that are potentially holding these students back in their academic endeavor and therefore work alongside the students in order to create a solution for them so that they won't feel the need to depart from school.

Tutoring and Coaches

Other methods include establishing more or better tutoring centers that can help students with any academic problems that they may have. Furthermore, having a program where the students can become the tutors themselves may help them become more comfortable in their learning experience. Not only that, but implementing mentors or "success coaches" for students where their progress is tracked throughout the semester may give faculty members a method to understand a student's progress and tackle issues as they may arise throughout the school year. Another method could be adding counseling centers that cater directly towards students who need a space to relax and detox from any stress that they may be experiencing. Doing so may help students who are having difficulties at school and give them an avenue to voice their issues.

Enhancing the Classroom Experience

Another strategy that we can examine is enriching the learning experience for students within the classrooms themselves. It is important for professors to establish clear expectations of the standards and workload that will be present for a class so that students can better prepare themselves throughout the semester. This is especially true for freshmen who are in the midst of transitioning into a postsecondary education. By employing methods such as tying student participation to grades and incorporating more team related projects within the classroom, students are more likely to build meaningful relationships with their peers as well as better prepare them for the workforce and cooperate with their future coworkers. Additionally, providing a means for students to supply constant feedback for their professors in the form of surveys can provide professors a guideline in which they can better support their students. The National Commission on Higher Education Attainment (NCHEA) has also explored the issue of student retention and have provided steps in how post-secondary institutions can improve the engagement between faculty staff and students that will have a positive impact on

student retention.¹² These includes allocating more resources towards personnel and specific programs that enhances student retention and less on amenities that are meant to attract more enrollments like in the past. Furthermore, the NCHEA notes the importance of expanding programs that focus on college readiness for students and giving faculty members including faculty who are only part time more resources in developing solutions that aid in enhancing overall student persistence.

Success at FSU

A specific example of a university putting some of these ideas into practice is Florida State University (FSU). Since 1999, FSU has been implementing programs that employ strategies in order to improve both retention and graduation rates. These strategies include employing academic advising services for students where trained advisors are charged with guiding students throughout their time at school in order to ensure they are able to graduate. Furthermore, success coaches are employed where students that FSU has qualified as being at risk of dropping out are assigned biweekly coaching by coaches who can help them with their academic needs. Other strategies have also included very thorough tutoring services that entail 15-minute sessions that any student can simply drop in at the university library. All of these programs have been very effective as seen by how their freshman retention rate had increased from 85.3% in 1999 to 92.4% in 2010. Additionally, their 6-year completion rate has risen from 68% in 2008 to 74% in 2012.¹⁴

Retention through Selectivity

On another note, certain universities such as Columbia or Cornell University are able to boast high freshman retention rates of 98% and 97% respectively.¹ However, much of this can be attributed to their selectiveness and the competitive nature of their enrollment process that

consequently leads to a student population who are more likely to graduate. This however, leaves out many of the students who are oftentimes underrepresented in schools such as minorities and those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

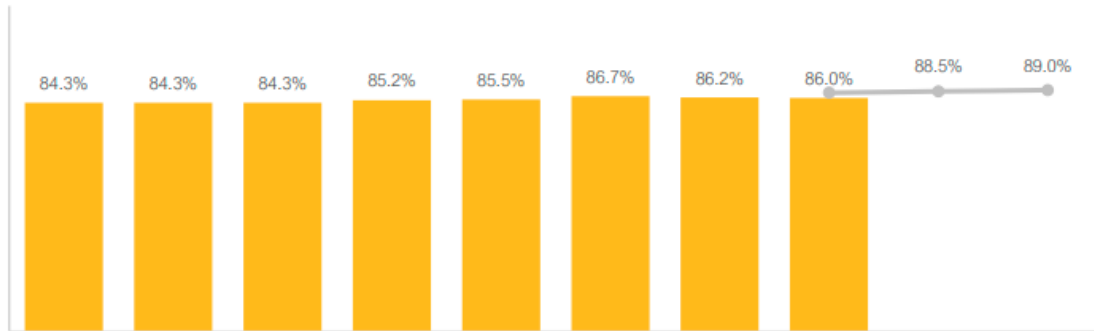
The Three Major Public Universities in AZ

Although the freshman retention rate in Arizona is low, if we were to focus primarily on the 3 public universities in the state which include ASU, UofA, and NAU we can see a vast difference in retention rate. This is indicated by how their freshman retention rates are 86%, 75.8%, and 84.5% respectively. A key factor that may explain this stark contrast is in the many different facilities that each university offers to their students that can specifically accommodate freshman students. ASU for example, offers detailed courses such as WPC 101 that every business student must take that is specially made to ease the transition for students enrolling into college for the first time. Furthermore, cohorts are also made when first registering for classes that are specifically designed to group students of the same major together in order to encourage more interactions among the students. While at UofA, they offer specific counseling for students through their CAPs services that act as a mental and emotional crutch for students whether it be from school or global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Additionally, NAU also offers various tutoring programs such as their Math Achievement Program that utilizes student peers to help other students in targeted math courses that can be challenging.⁸ All of these types of resources that are made available to students helps foster a sense of community among students, especially freshman who need it the most as many leave their homes in order to attend school. These types of relationships can then bolster student engagement and increase the overall retention rate of these students by also giving them more avenues to seek help in regards to any concerns they may have at school.

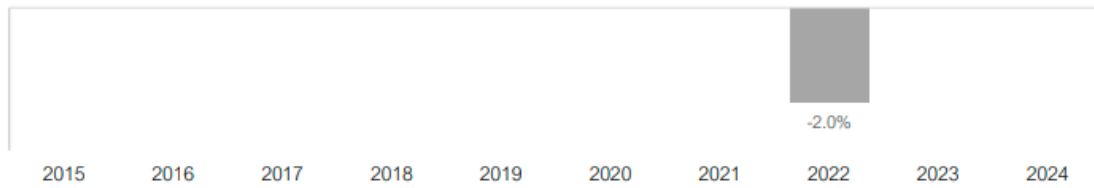
Arizona State University

Exhibit ASU.FTSR.1: First-Time, Full-Time On-Campus Student Retention Rate and Enterprise Metric Goals

Retention Rate and Enterprise Plan Goals



Actual to Goal Differences

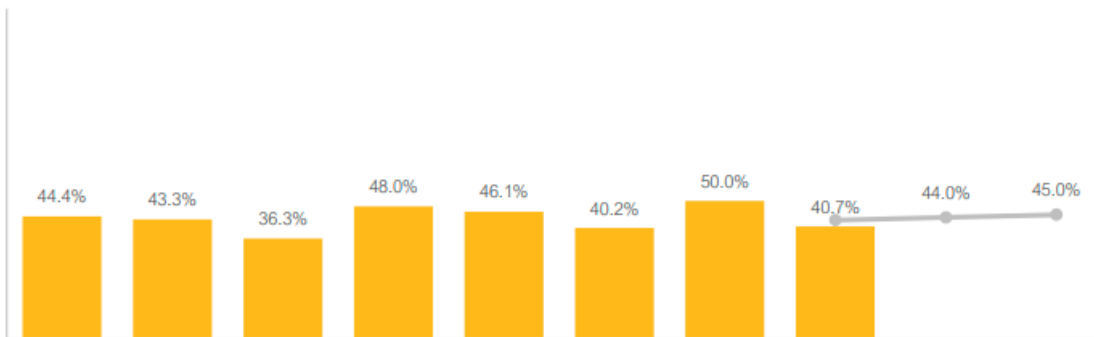


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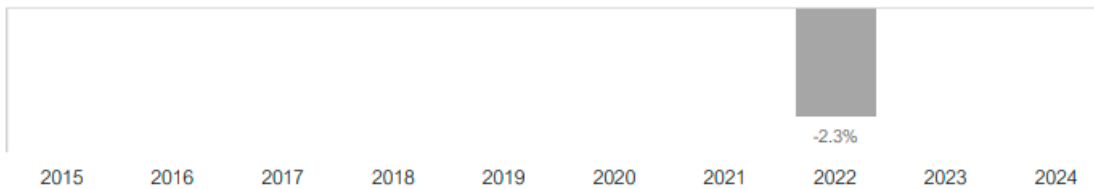
<https://azregents.edu/sites/default/files/reports/2022-freshman-retention.pdf>

Exhibit ASU.FTSR.2: First-Time, Part-Time On-Campus Student Retention Rate and Enterprise Metric Goals

Retention Rate and Enterprise Plan Goals



Actual to Goal Differences



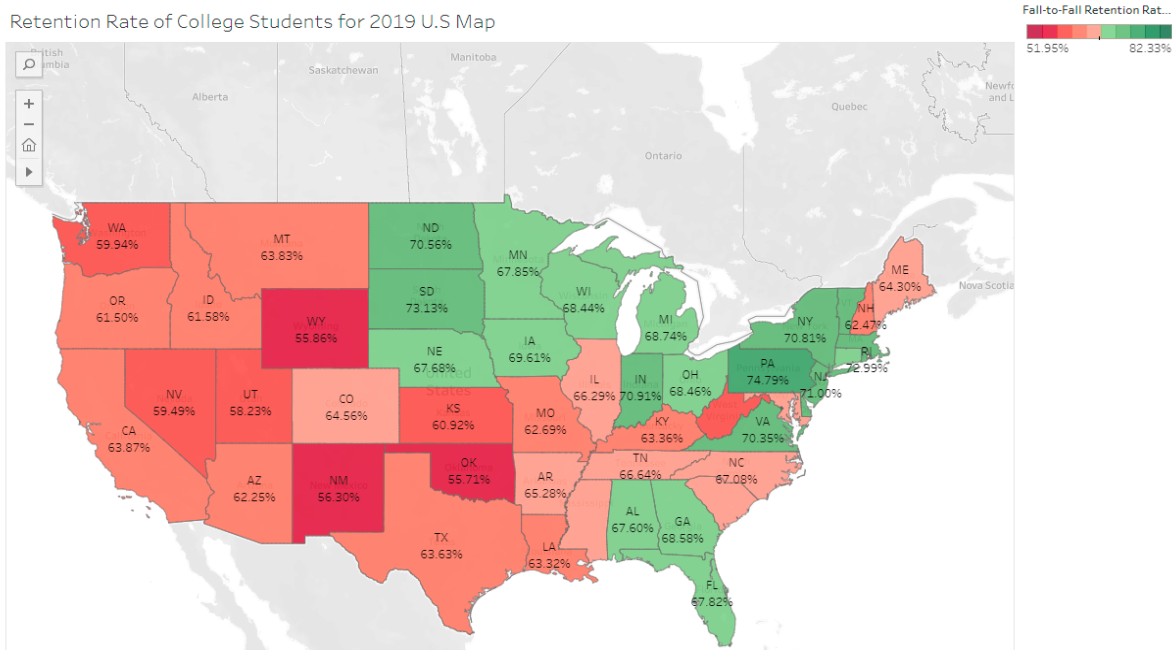
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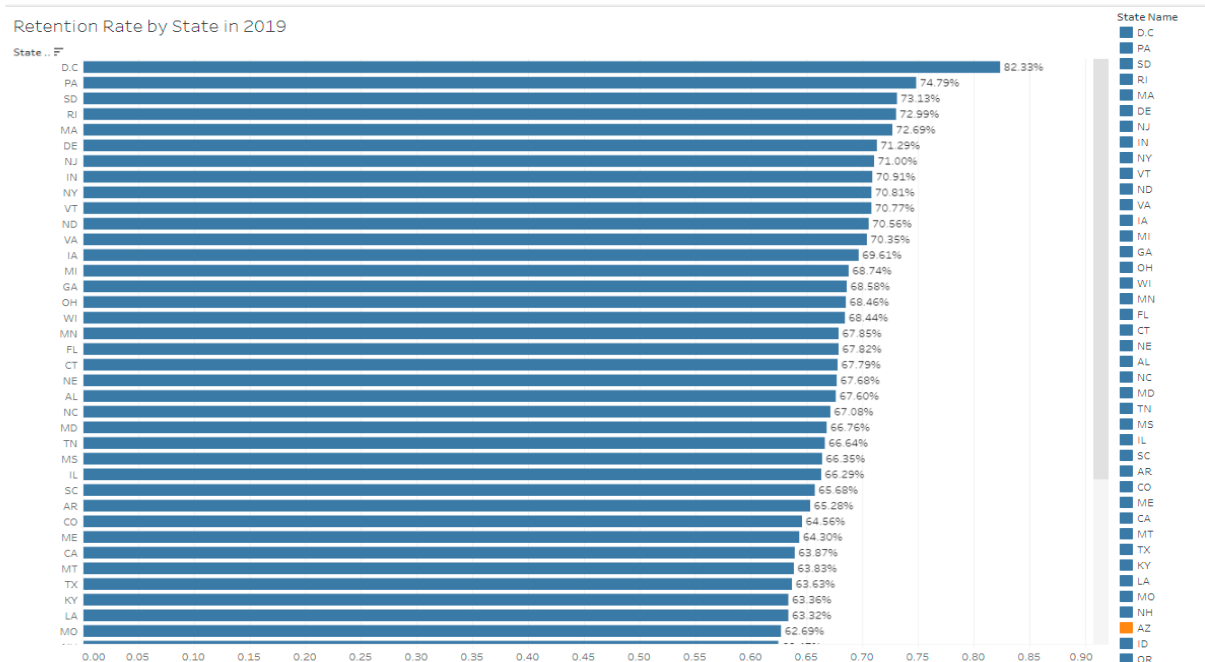
Conclusion

Overall, many universities in the U.S have shifted from increasing their number of enrollments each year to raising the retention rate of their students. This is driven by the costs associated with losing students and the need for more people with college degrees in today's modern world. One of the focal points in increasing the overall college completion rate is engaging in programs that will better retain students while they are still in their freshmen year. College freshmen are known to struggle more than other students due to the transition from high school to a postsecondary education and taking steps to help these students will be vital in enabling them to graduate. Practices that help students become more engaged in and outside of the classroom as well as a strong support system between faculty members and the students are necessary steps in ensuring that students don't later drop off. By implementing such programs and ideas, many universities may be able to circumvent much of the costs associated with students leaving college unfinished as well as give a brighter future for students that would have been left behind.

Appendix: Graphs in Tableau

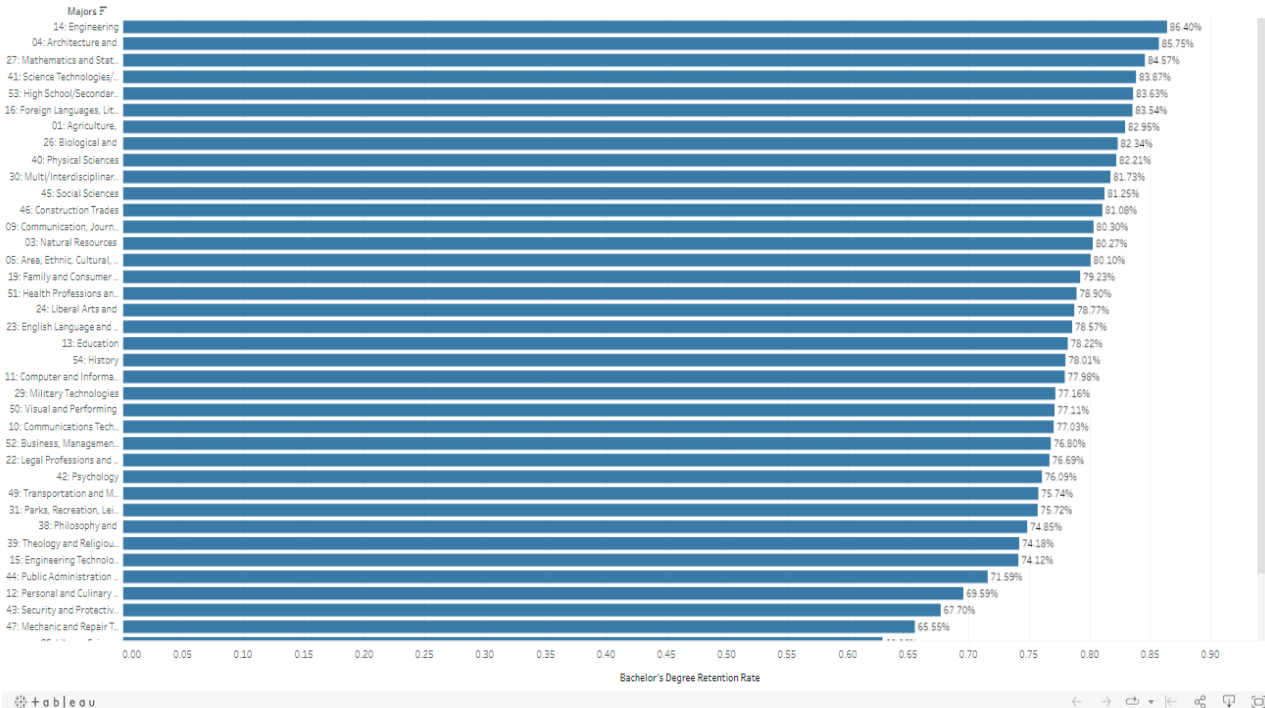


State Average Retention Rate Map, 2019. [Tableau dashboard available here.](#)



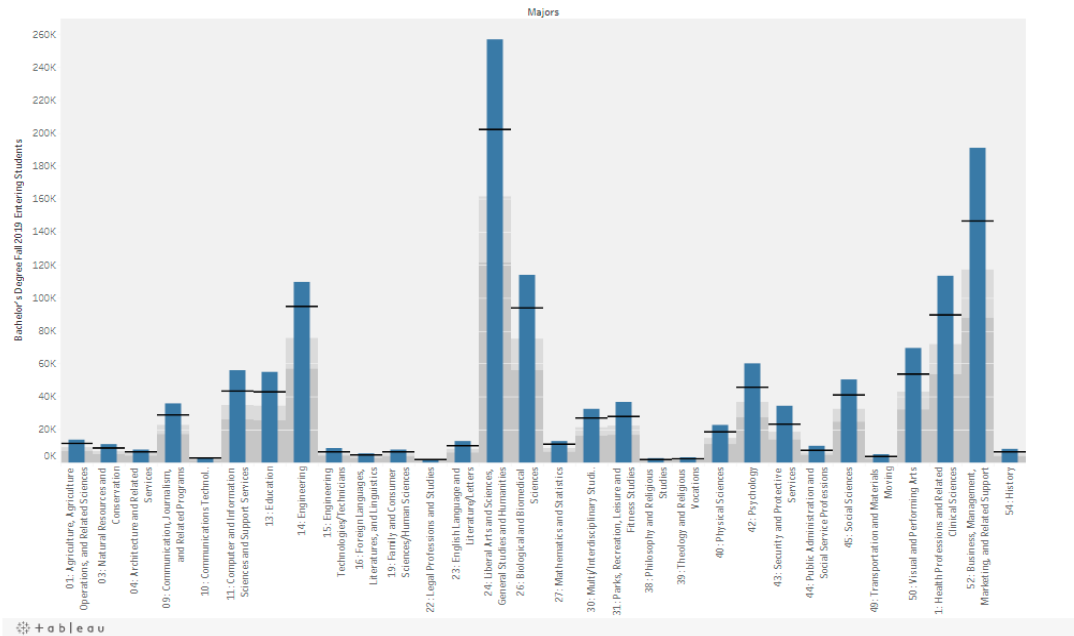
Retention Rates by State, 2019. [Tableau Dashboard available here.](#)

Retention Rate of Students by Major for 2019



Retention Rates by Major, 2019. [Tableau Dashboard available here.](#)

Number Enrolled and Retention Count by Major for 2019



Enrollment and Retention Counts by Major, 2019. [Tableau Dashboard available here.](#)

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