



SUCCESS

2025–26 Degrees Report:

Degrees & Credentials Awarded by KCTCS, Public Universities & AIKCU



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About Us:

The Council on Postsecondary Education is Kentucky's higher education coordinating board overseeing state public universities and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. The Council also licenses non-profit and for-profit higher education institutions to operate in the Commonwealth. The Council facilitates a positive return on investment of public funds by monitoring academic quality, affordability, and student success through policy and accountability measures.



Table of Contents

From the President.	4
Executive summary.	5
Why does degree and credential production matter?	6
Total degrees and credentials awarded, all levels and sectors.	7
Total undergraduate certificates and diplomas awarded by sector.	8
Total associate degrees awarded by sector.	9
Total bachelor's degrees awarded by sector.	10
Total master's and specialist degrees awarded by sector.	11
Total doctoral degrees awarded by sector.	12
Total postgraduate certificates awarded by sector.	13
Total undergraduate degrees and credentials awarded to adult students, by sector.	14
Total undergraduate degrees and credentials awarded to low-income students, by sector.	15
Six-year graduation rate at public universities, by student type.	16
Three-year graduation rate at KCTCS, by student type.	17

From the President

A MILESTONE WITHIN REACH

Kentucky's progress toward a more educated workforce depends on one thing done well, year after year: helping students earn postsecondary credentials of value. In 2025-26, our colleges and universities hit an historic high in degree and credential production.

Kentucky institutions conferred 98,347 awards, an increase of nearly 4,600 over the previous year and almost 21% over the past five years. If our campuses sustain even a portion of this year's momentum, Kentucky is on track to produce 100,000 degrees and credentials in a single year for the first time ever.

I want to draw particular attention to bachelor's degrees. Statewide production rose 5.3% to 24,661, and Kentucky is now awarding more bachelor's degrees than it did before the pandemic. Public universities led that gain with a 6.2% increase, continuing last year's rebound following several years of decline. This matters because 18% of adult Kentuckians hold a bachelor's degree, compared with 23% nationally. Because these graduates most often fill technical, clinical, managerial, and professional roles, narrowing that gap strengthens wages, communities, and the state's economic competitiveness.

Progress of this kind is never the product of one campus or one year. It reflects sustained effort from faculty and staff across all three sectors, and from students who balance coursework with the demands of work and family. CPE will continue working with campuses, employers, policymakers, and communities to reach the state's educational attainment goal of 60% of adults with a postsecondary credential. I am grateful to everyone whose work is reflected in the pages that follow.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Aaron Thompson".

**Aaron Thompson, President
Council on Postsecondary Education**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Total credentials are up in nearly every category in 2025–26.

(includes KCTCS, public universities & AIKCU)

Degrees & Credentials

1-Year Change: 4.8%
5-Year Change: 20.9%

Kentucky awarded more degrees and credentials in 2025-26 than ever before and is approaching 100,000 in a single year.

Certificates & Diplomas

1-Year Change: 8.5%
5-Year Change: 30.5%

Short-term credentials grew in all three sectors and now account for about 40% of all awards statewide. Over 90% are awarded by KCTCS.

Associate Degrees

1-Year Change: 8.4%
5-Year Change: 11.1%

All three sectors increased awards, lifting associate production to its highest level in the last five years. Most are awarded by KCTCS.

Bachelor's Degrees

1-Year Change: 5.3%
5-Year Change: 5.3%

Bachelor's degrees rose in both four-year sectors and, for the first time since COVID-related declines, exceeded pre-pandemic levels.

Master's Degrees

1-Year Change: -7.0%
5-Year Change: 24.5%

Public universities posted a fifth straight year of growth, increasing 4.1%. AIKCU's 15.2% decline reflects a shift to undergraduate programming.

Doctoral Degrees

1-Year Change: 7.4%
5-Year Change: 34.1%

Doctoral production grew in both four-year sectors and has risen by a third over five years, driven largely by growth at AIKCU institutions.

Adult Degrees & Credentials

1-Year Change: 7.1%
5-Year Change: -2.3%

Credentials awarded to adults 25 and older have increased for two consecutive years and are now at their highest level since 2020-21.

Low-Income Degrees & Credentials

1-Year Change: NA
5-Year Change: NA

Low-income awards are not yet available and will be added in late December 2026, after financial aid data are reported.



BACKGROUND

Why does degree and credential production matter?

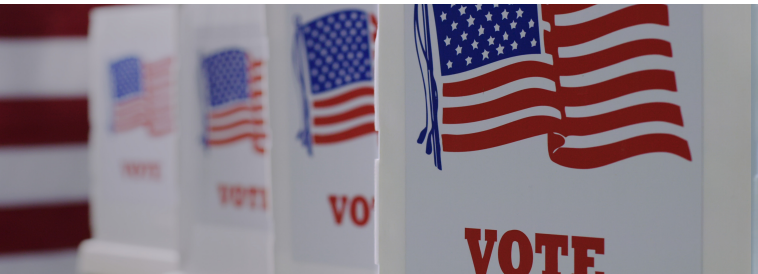
To make Kentucky's workforce more competitive, the state needs 60% of working-age adults to have a postsecondary credential by the year 2030. Current statewide attainment is 55.5%. Educational attainment is not an abstraction; it helps determine what Kentuckians earn, where employers invest, and how communities fare over time. Research shows that higher rates of educational attainment lead to:



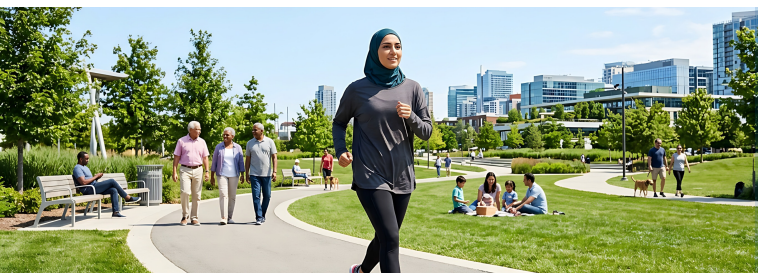
Higher earnings for graduates, increased tax revenues, lower poverty rates, and less reliance on public assistance.



Higher levels of employment and a more highly skilled workforce.



A more educated citizenry with higher rates of voting, volunteerism, and charitable giving.

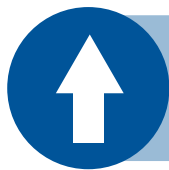
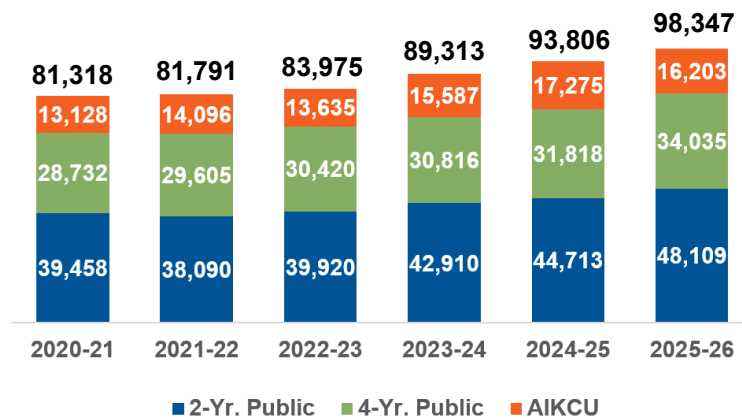


Healthier residents, less chronic disease, and lower healthcare costs.

RESULTS

Total degrees and credentials awarded, all levels and sectors

This metric includes all undergraduate and graduate degrees awarded by the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), public universities, and institutions affiliated with the Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities (AIKCU). Collectively, they conferred 98,347 degrees and credentials in 2025-26, an increase of 4.8% over last year and 20.9% over the past five years. This measure is most directly tied to Kentucky's educational attainment rate, which is the percentage of adults ages 25-64 with a postsecondary credential. Other factors influencing educational attainment are in- and out-migration of college graduates, over which the postsecondary system has little control.



KCTCS increased credential production 7.6% over last year and 21.9% over five years.



Public universities increased total awards 7.0% over last year and 18.5% over five years.

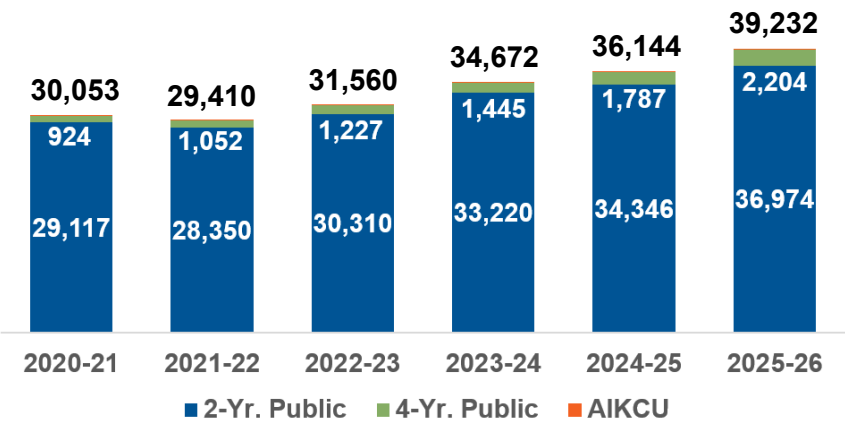


AIKCU institutions awarded 6.2% fewer credentials than last year but are up 23.4% over five years.

RESULTS

Total undergraduate certificates and diplomas awarded by sector

Certificates and diplomas are short-term credentials that lead to employment in technical and vocational fields. Most are offered by KCTCS, and these graduates are most likely to remain in Kentucky to work. Total undergraduate certificates and diplomas grew to 39,232 in 2025-26, an increase of 8.5% over the previous year and 30.5% over the past five years. Short-term credentials now account for roughly 40% of all postsecondary awards in the Commonwealth.



Note: Certificates and diplomas awarded at AIKCU institutions (orange bars) are omitted due to spacing. The counts are 2020-21=12, 2021-22=8, 2022-23=23, 2023-24=7, 2024-25=11, 2025-26=54.



KCTCS increased certificates and diplomas 7.7% over last year and 27.0% over five years.



Public universities awarded 417 more undergraduate certificates than last year, a 23.3% increase. The five-year increase is 138.5%.

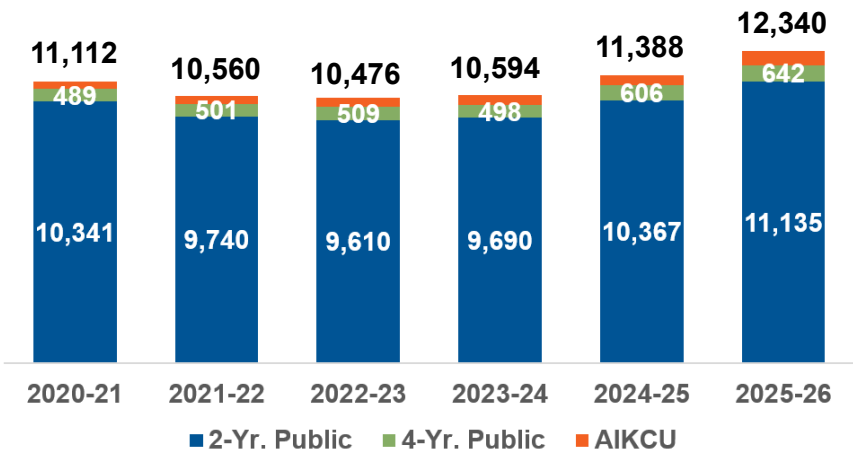


AIKCU institutions awarded 54 undergraduate certificates, up 43 from the previous year.

RESULTS

Total associate degrees awarded by sector

Kentucky awarded 12,340 associate degrees in 2025-26, an 8.4% increase over last year and an 11.1% increase over the past five years. Most associate degrees can be completed in two years and lead to immediate employment or further study at a four-year college or university. Completing general education courses at KCTCS and transferring to a public university offers an affordable path to a bachelor's degree. There also are transfer pathways from applied associate to bachelor's degrees.



Note: Counts for associate degrees awarded at AIKCU (orange bars) are omitted due to spacing. The counts are 2020-21=282, 2021-22=319, 2022-23=357, 2023-24=406, 2024-25=415, 2025-26=563.



KCTCS increased associate degrees 7.4% over last year and 7.7% over five years.



Public universities awarded 36 more associate degrees than last year (up 5.9%), bringing the total to 642. They are up 31.3% over five years.

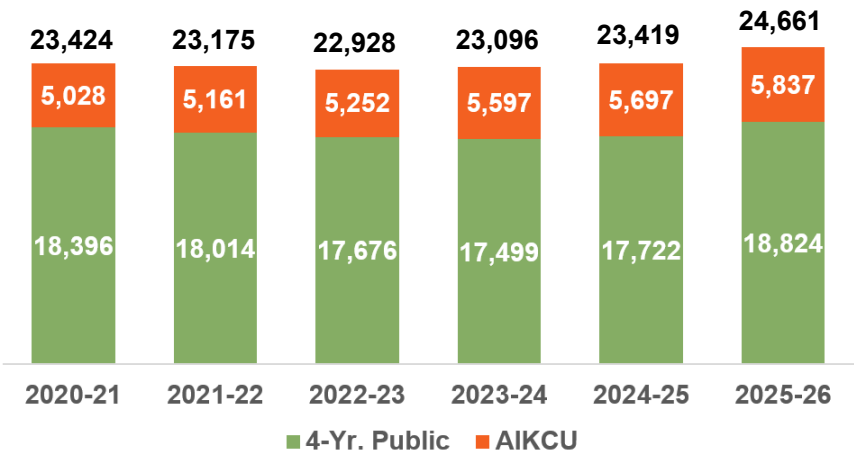


AIKCU awarded 148 more associate degrees than last year (up 35.7%), bringing the total to 563. They are up 99.6% over five years.

RESULTS

Total bachelor's degrees awarded by sector

Total bachelor's degrees climbed to 24,661, an increase of 5.3% over the previous year, the highest one-year growth rate for bachelor's degrees on record. A bachelor's degree is a four-year program that provides both foundational and in-depth knowledge, preparing graduates for a wide array of professional careers or postgraduate study. The share of adult Kentuckians who hold one, 18%, remains well below the national average of 23%. Baccalaureate graduates fill many of the technical, clinical, managerial, and professional roles that allow employers to expand. **Note: KCTCS does not award bachelor's degrees.**



 **Public universities increased bachelor's degree production by 6.2% over the previous year and 2.3% over the past five years.**

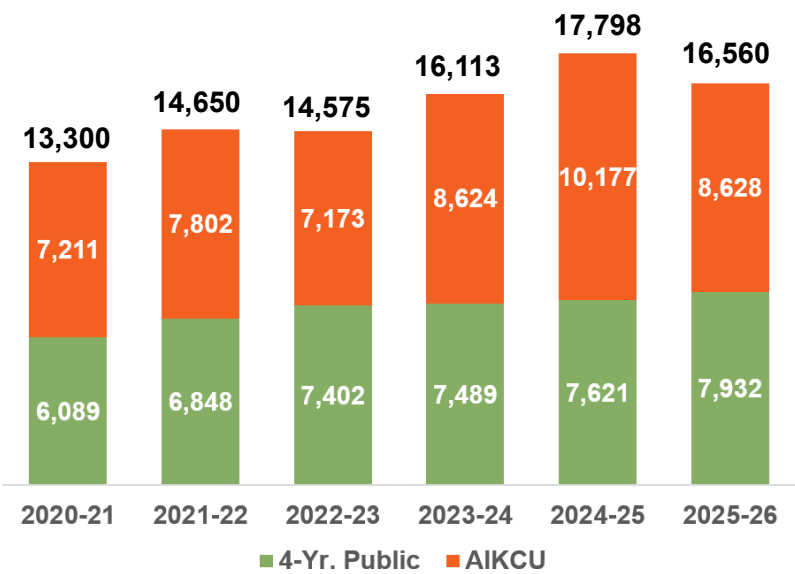
 **AIKCU institutions increased bachelor's degrees by 2.5% over the previous year and 16.1% over the past five years.**

RESULTS

Total master's and specialist degrees awarded by sector

Master's degrees are academic programs consisting of at least 30 credit hours or the equivalent beyond the baccalaureate level. Specialist degrees normally require 60 hours of concentrated coursework beyond the bachelor's degree and are generally offered in the field of education to acknowledge completion of advanced study designed to help individuals meet licensure requirements.

Total master's and specialist degrees fell to 16,560 in 2025-26, a decrease of 7.0% from the previous year. The drop primarily is due to a strategic decision among several AIKCU institutions to eliminate or scale back graduate programs to focus on undergraduate education. Even with this year's decline, overall production remains 24.5% above 2020-21 levels. **Note: KCTCS does not award graduate degrees.**



 **Public universities increased master's/specialist degrees by 4.1% over last year and 30.3% over the past five years.**

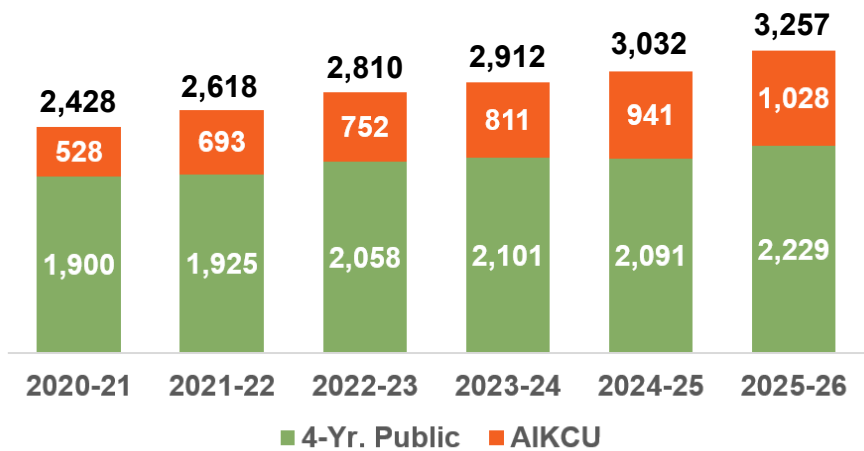
 **AIKCU decreased master's/specialist degrees by 15.2% over last year, but they were up 19.7% over the past five years.**

RESULTS

Total doctoral degrees awarded by sector

Doctoral degrees require advanced work beyond the master's level. CPE recognizes four classifications for doctoral degrees: 1) doctoral degree, completed all coursework and dissertation, 2) doctoral degree, completed all coursework but working on dissertation, 3) doctoral degree, professional practice, and 4) all other doctoral degrees that are not research, scholarship, or professional.

Kentucky institutions awarded 3,257 doctoral degrees in 2025-26, an increase of 7.4% over the previous year and 34.1% over the past five years. Doctoral degrees represent the highest level of academic achievement and are essential for advanced careers in higher education, law, healthcare, and research. **Note: KCTCS does not award doctoral degrees.**





Public universities increased doctoral degrees by 6.6% over the previous year and 17.3% over the last five years.

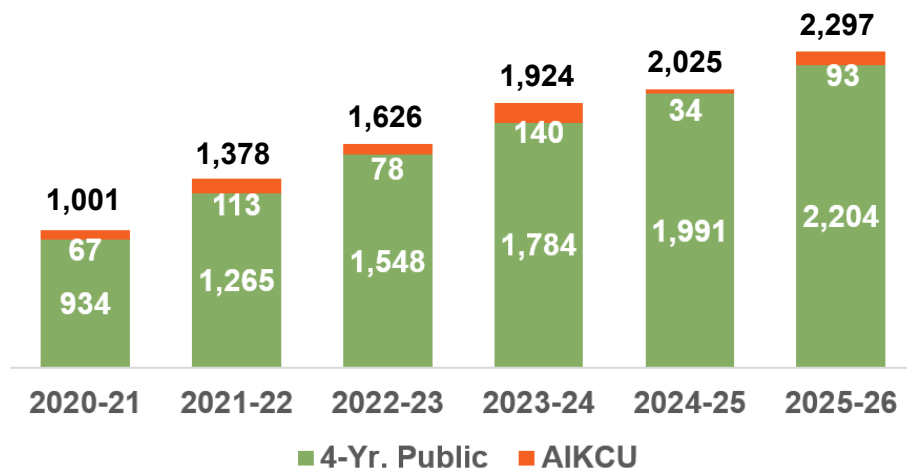


AIKCU institutions increased doctoral degrees by 9.2% over last year and 94.7% over the past five years, nearly doubling production.

RESULTS

Total postgraduate certificates awarded by sector

Postgraduate certificates are shorter than a master's degree (about one-third of the credits) and focus on specific subjects. They are ideal for professional development, providing an opportunity for advanced learning without a dissertation. Nearly all are awarded by public universities. Their rapid growth suggests steady demand from working professionals who need targeted, advanced skills without the time and cost of a master's or doctoral degree. Total postgraduate certificates increased to 2,297 in 2025-26, rising 13.4% from last year and 129.5% over the past five years. This award category has grown more rapidly than any other.



Public universities awarded 2,204 postgraduate certificates in 2025-26, up 213 from the prior year (a 10.7% increase) and 1,270 over five years (a 136% increase).

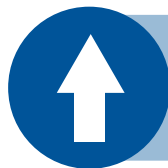
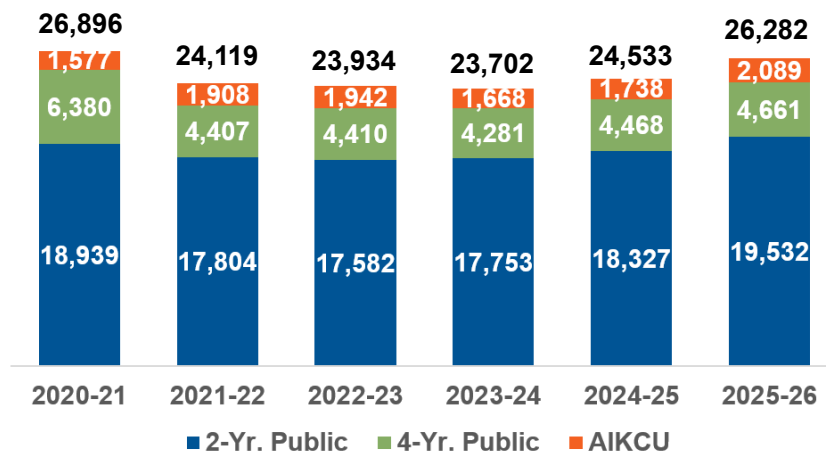


AIKCU institutions awarded 93 postgraduate certificates, up from 34 last year (a 173.5% increase). They have increased by 38.8% over the last five years.

RESULTS

Total undergraduate credentials awarded to adult students, by sector

Thousands of adult Kentuckians have earned some college credit but hold no postsecondary degree or credential. Reaching them is essential to achieving the 2030 attainment goal, because there are not enough traditional-age students in the pipeline. Adults are more likely than younger students to be employed and raising families in the communities where they study, making them more likely to remain in the state and contribute to our workforce. Total degrees and credentials awarded to adult students (25 and older) reached a low in 2023-24, after several consecutive years of decline. For the past two years, awards have been rebounding. In 2025-26, total credentials awarded to adults increased 7.1% over the previous year, but they are down 2.3% from five years ago.



Degrees and credentials awarded to adults by KCTCS increased 6.6% over the previous year and 3.1% over the past five years.



Degrees and credentials awarded to adults by public universities increased 4.3% over last year but remain 26.9% below the 2020-21 total.

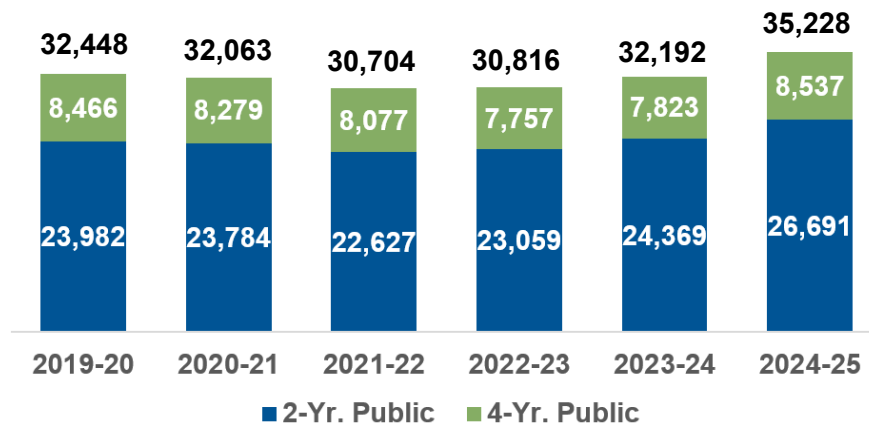


Degrees and credentials awarded to adults by AIKCU institutions increased 20.2% from last year and 32.5% over the past five years.

RESULTS

Total undergraduate credentials awarded to low-income students, by sector

A low-income student is defined as one who received a federal Pell grant at any point during their enrollment. Pell grant eligibility is determined by financial need and considers factors such as family income and size. CPE monitors outcomes for low-income students to ensure higher education is accessible and affordable for our most vulnerable populations. Total undergraduate degrees and credentials awarded to low-income students rose to 35,228 in 2024-25, increasing 9.4% over last year and 8.6% over the past five years. Data for 2025-26 will update in December 2026, after financial aid awards are reported. **Note: CPE does not collect financial aid information for graduate students or any students attending AIKCU institutions.**



KCTCS increased low-income degrees and credentials 9.5% over the previous year and 11.3% over the past five years.

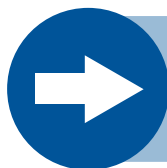
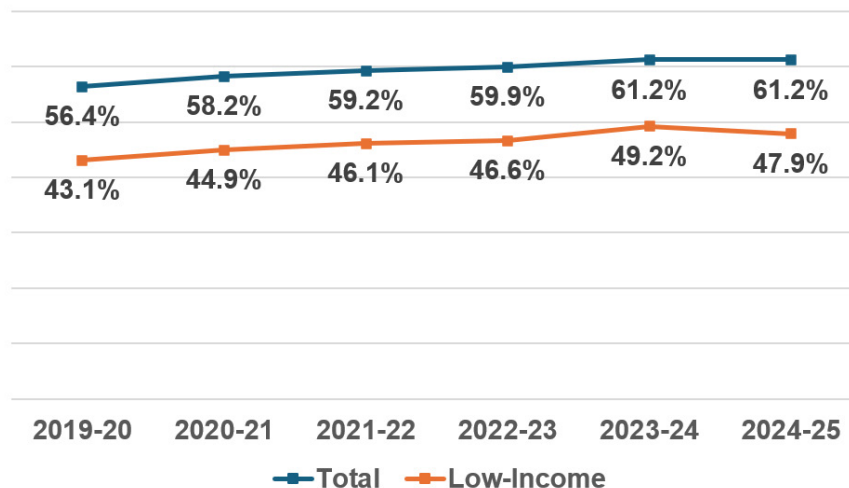


Public universities increased low-income degrees and credentials 9.1% over the previous year and 0.8% over the past five years.

RESULTS

Six-year graduation rate at public universities, by student type

The six-year graduation rate is reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and reflects the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who receive a bachelor's degree within six years of entry (150% of the normal time frame). Part-time and transfer students are excluded from the cohort, as are students who begin in the spring semester. Despite these limitations, graduation rates remain a useful way to compare how effectively public institutions across the country fulfill their core undergraduate mission - ensuring that students have an efficient and affordable path to completion. **Note: Data for 2025-26 will update in December 2026.**



The six-year graduation rate in 2024-25 was 61.2%, the same as last year. The rate has risen 4.8 points over the past five years.

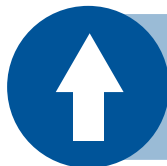
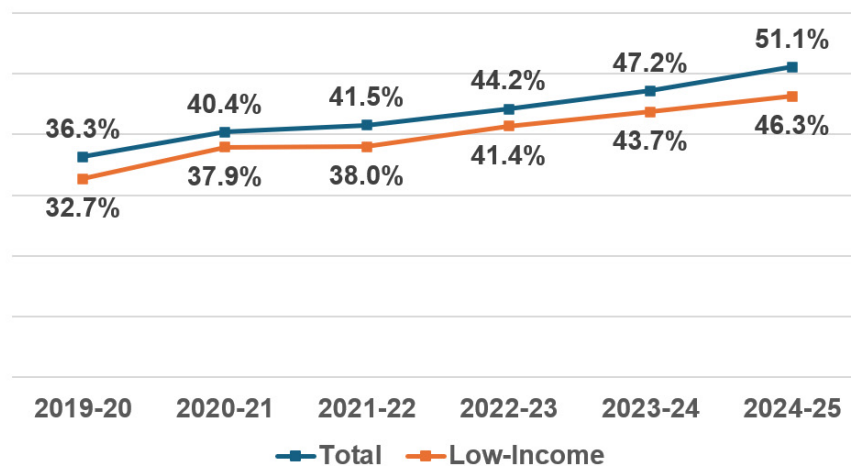


The six-year graduation rate for low-income students in 2024-25 was 47.9%, down 1.3 points from last year but up 4.8 points over five years.

RESULTS

Three-year graduation rate at KCTCS, by student type

The three-year graduation rate is the indicator public community and technical colleges report to IPEDS that reflects the percentage of first-time, full-time associate or credential-seeking students entering in the fall who graduate within three years of entry (150% of the normal time frame). **Note: Data for 2025-26 will update in December 2026.**



The three-year graduation rate in 2024-25 was 51.1%, 3.9 points higher than last year and 14.8 points higher than five years ago.



The three-year graduation rate for low-income students in 2024-25 was 46.3%, up 2.6 points from last year and 13.6 points over five years.



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Printed with state funds. October 2026

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