

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Tracking Eighth Graders' Post-Secondary Outcomes in Texas

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### Executive Summary

This study tracked college and workforce outcomes for public school students in Texas who began eighth grade in the fall of 1998. Students were tracked for 17 years, through the summer of 2015, when they were approximately 30 years old. Of the 267,358 eighth-grade students in Texas in the fall of 1998, 29 percent finished a postsecondary certificate or degree. Female, white, Asian and non-economically disadvantaged students were more likely to earn a postsecondary credential than male, Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.

### Background

Access to a quality education is critical in preparing children and young adults in the state and region to be successful in the new, structured economy. By the year 2027, 70% of all jobs in the United States will require some postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, 2020).

However, in Texas, just one-fifth of students who were in the eighth grade in the fall of 1998 earned a postsecondary credential within six years of high school graduation, according to a longitudinal study (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2012). In another report, significant racial and ethnic disparities in college enrollment and completion were found among high school seniors in the Houston Independent School District who graduated in 2007 through 2009 (Holzman, 2018). Also concerning was the high rate of idleness: One-third of graduates were neither studying nor working after high school. Another study estimated that in 2012, there were 111,000 disengaged youth

### KEY FINDINGS

**The fall after high school** (fall 2003), 39% of Texas students were enrolled in college, 38% were working and 23% were neither in college nor working.

**Among individuals neither in college nor working**, one-quarter were unemployed and more than half were not in the labor force, which might include stay-at-home parents or people working in the underground economy.

**One in five students** earned a postsecondary certificate or degree within six years of expected high school graduation (by the end of summer 2009). However, upon extending the window to 12 years after high school (by the end of summer 2015), the postsecondary completion rate increased to 29%.

**There was significant variation** in the rates of college enrollment and completion by gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Female, white, Asian and non-economically disadvantaged students had higher rates of enrollment and completion than male, Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.

and young adults in the Houston metropolitan area (Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2016).

Using data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), we tracked for 17 years the postsecondary and workforce outcomes of more than 267,000 Texas public school students who started eighth grade in the fall of 1998. About 21% of students from this cohort received some sort of postsecondary credential from a Texas college or university within six years of their anticipated high school graduation date. The share of students with a postsecondary credential increased to 29% when we tracked students for six additional years.

## Data and Methods

The primary data used in the analyses came from the TEA and THECB. The data provided detailed information on college enrollment and completion for students attending public and private postsecondary institutions in the state of Texas, as well as measures of students' demographic and socioeconomic background. Because the datasets contained records only for students who enrolled in institutions in the state of Texas, the statistics presented are likely underestimates of students' overall participation in postsecondary education.

Aside from presenting figures on college enrollment and completion, we also used data from the TWC, which allowed us to observe whether students were earning wages from employment in the state of Texas. In our annual estimates of student activities, a student was classified as *working* if they were found in the TWC data but not enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Data from the TEA, THECB and TWC were accessed and analyzed at the University of Houston Education Research Center (UH ERC). The data allowed us to produce three kinds of estimates:

### Background Characteristics, Fall 1998

For Texas, Harris County and the 20 districts in Harris County, we provide estimates of the demographic and socioeconomic composition of students who began eighth grade in the fall of 1998.

**Of the 267,358 Texas students who began eighth grade in the fall of 1998, 21% received a certificate or degree from a Texas college or university within six years of their anticipated high school graduation date.**

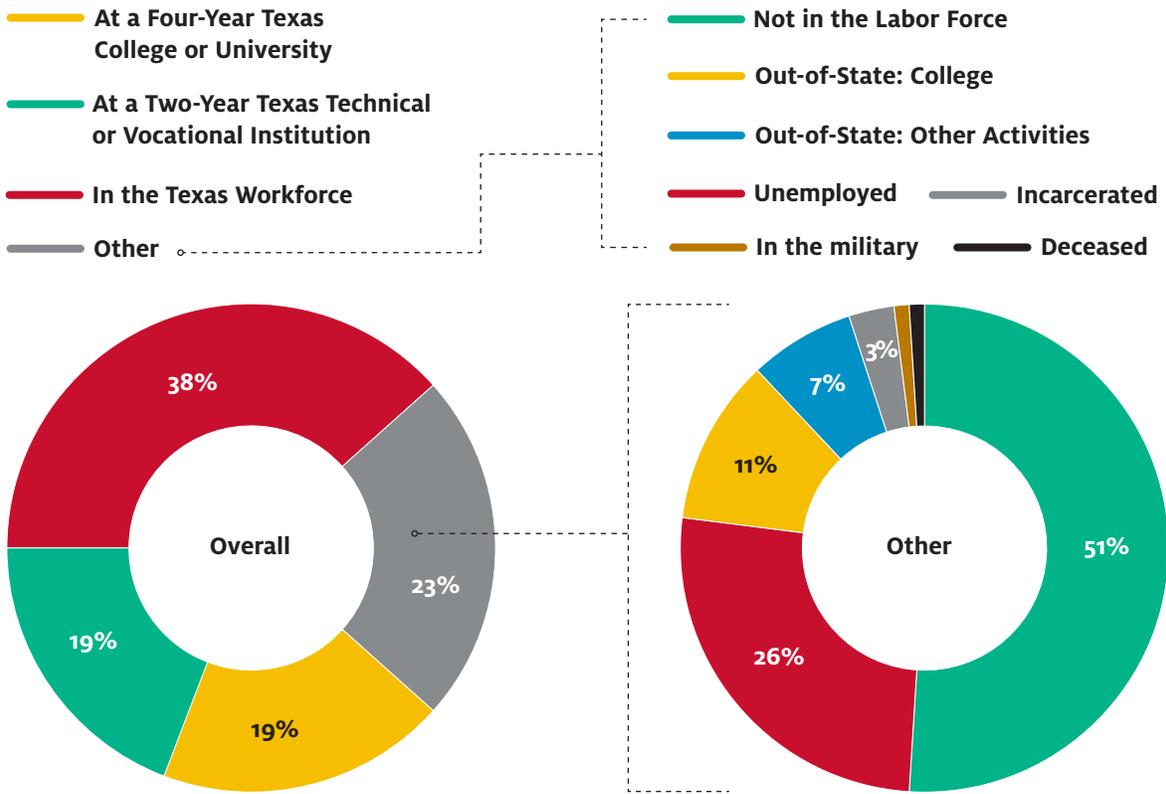
### Student Activities, Fall 2003 to Fall 2014

These annual, noncumulative estimates show the percentage of students attending a Texas postsecondary institution, working in the Texas labor force or engaged in another activity in the fall of a given year. We divide postsecondary attendance into two categories: 1) attending a two-year, technical or vocational institution offering certificates, diplomas, licenses or associate degrees and 2) attending a four-year institution offering bachelor's or more advanced degrees.

Students who are neither attending a Texas postsecondary institution nor working in the Texas labor force are part of the *other activities* category. In three select years—2003, 2008 and 2013—we estimate breakdowns of the other activities category. These breakdowns include 1) enlisted in the military, 2) unemployed, 3) not in the labor force, 4) incarcerated, 5) deceased, 6) living out of state and attending a postsecondary institution and 7) living out of state and engaged in other activities. Since data on these activities were unavailable at the UH ERC, we used data from the Current Population Survey October Supplement (School Enrollment), the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, the U.S. Decennial Census, Harris County Military Enlistment Records, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the Texas Department of State Health Services.

**FIGURE 1**

## What Texas Students Who Graduated in the Spring of 2003 Were Doing Several Months Later in the Fall of 2003



### Educational Attainment, Spring 2004 to Spring 2015

These cumulative estimates show the percentage of students who earned a postsecondary credential from a Texas college or university by the spring of a given year. The categories include 1) no postsecondary credential, 2) certificate, diploma or license, 3) associate degree, 4) bachelor's degree, 5) master's degree and 6) doctorate or professional degree (J.D., M.D.).

### Findings

#### Background Characteristics

For context, 51% of students in the cohort were

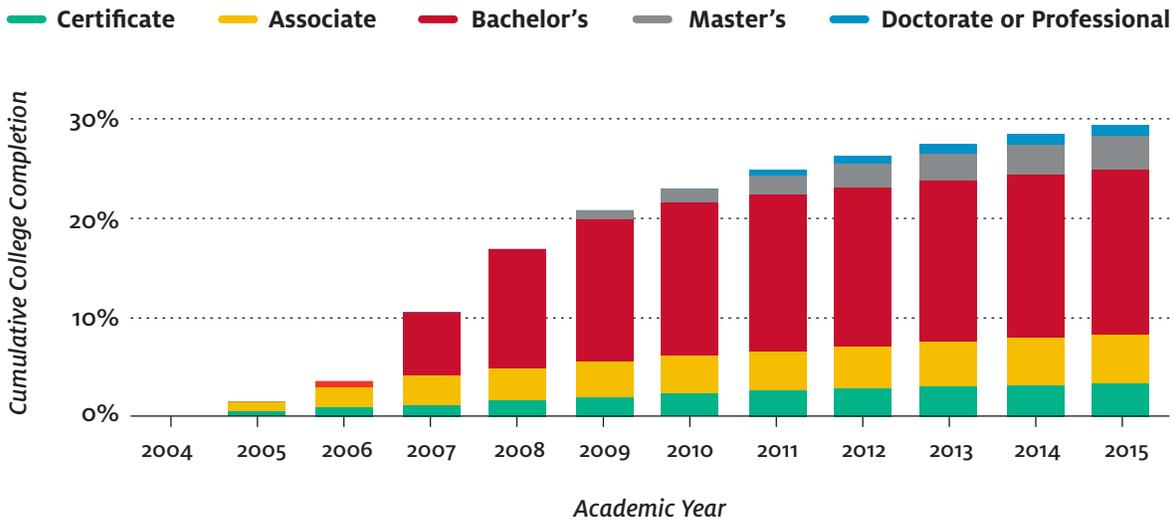
male, and 49% were female. In terms of race and ethnicity, 49% were white, 14% were Black, 34% were Hispanic, 2% were Asian and less than 1% were Native American. In terms of socioeconomic status, 58% were non-economically disadvantaged, and 42% were economically disadvantaged.

#### Student Activities

In the fall of 2003, several months after high school graduation, 19% of Texas students were attending a four-year college or university in the state (Figure 1). Another 19% were attending a two-year, technical or vocational institution in the state. A sizable share was working in the Texas

**FIGURE 2**

## Cumulative College Completion in Texas, 2004 –2015



labor force—38%.

The remaining 23% were neither in a Texas college nor working in the state. When we broke this share down, the plurality of students in this group was not in the labor force (51% were neither in college nor working). Approximately 26% of these students were unemployed, 11% were attending a postsecondary institution out of state, 7% were engaged in other activities out of state, 3% were incarcerated, 1% were enlisted in the military and less than 1% were deceased.

In 2003, there were notable differences in Texas' college enrollment rates by gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Women (43%) were more likely to attend a postsecondary institution than men (34%). Asian students had the highest rates of postsecondary attendance (60%), followed by white students (46%), Black students (31%) and Hispanic students (29%). And while 49% of non-economically disadvantaged students enrolled in college, only 24% of economically disadvantaged students did so.

### **Educational Attainment**

By spring 2009, six years after high school graduation, 21% of students from Texas had earned a postsecondary credential. By spring 2015, 12 years after high school graduation, the share of students with a postsecondary credential increased to 29%: 3% of students had a certificate, diploma or license, 5% had an associate degree, 17% had a bachelor's degree, 3% had a master's degree and 1% had a doctorate or professional degree (Figure 2).

In 2015, there were notable differences by gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Women (35%) were more likely to earn postsecondary credentials than men (24%). Asian students had the highest rates of postsecondary completion (53% earned a credential), followed by white students (36%), Hispanic students (22%), and Black students (19%). And while 38% of non-economically disadvantaged students had earned a credential, only 17% of economically disadvantaged students were able to do so.

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Intervene with a focus on equity.

- There was significant variation in educational outcomes by gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
- In addressing college and career readiness, policymakers and practitioners should identify strategies that can serve all students, including targeted programming and differentiated instruction, with a focus on equity.

### Districts are unique but can learn from one another.

- There was significant variation in educational outcomes among the 20 school districts in Harris County.
- While districts differ in the students served and strategies used, they may be able to identify forums during which they can share what has worked to improve college and career readiness.

### Identify why some students are neither in college nor working after high school.

- Data collection efforts like additional linked data, survey data and interview data may help policymakers and practitioners learn more about and support this population.

### College completion statistics should consider nontraditional students.

- Statistics are often calculated with traditional students in mind—students who enter college right after high school, attend full-time and complete without stopping or dropping out.
- Many students may have responsibilities outside school disrupting their education. Others may pursue an education after working,

completing military service or serving a prison sentence.

- There are many paths to and through college. These different paths may explain the increase in college completion when the window extended from six to 12 years of high school.

### Repeat the analyses in the future.

- The statistics may look different for more recent cohorts.
- The state and school districts have increased their focus on college enrollment and completion. For instance, the Houston Independent School District has implemented innovative college counseling programs like EMERGE and College Success Advisors.
- Because of these efforts, educational opportunities for younger students may be more promising.

### Support efforts to link data across multiple agencies.

- The Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Workforce Commission should be commended for collaborating to link data to study pathways into college and the workforce.
- However, current data-collection practices do not capture other post-high school activities, such as enlisting in the military or being imprisoned.
- Linking data to additional agencies (e.g., military, criminal justice, health) can improve student tracking over time and space.

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**Disclaimer:** *This policy brief is a result of approved research conducted using data through the University of Houston Education Research Center (UH ERC). Results, opinions, recommendations or points of view expressed in this policy brief represent the work and consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the University of Houston, the UH ERC and/or its funding organizations.*