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After High School: Readiness, Access, and Success

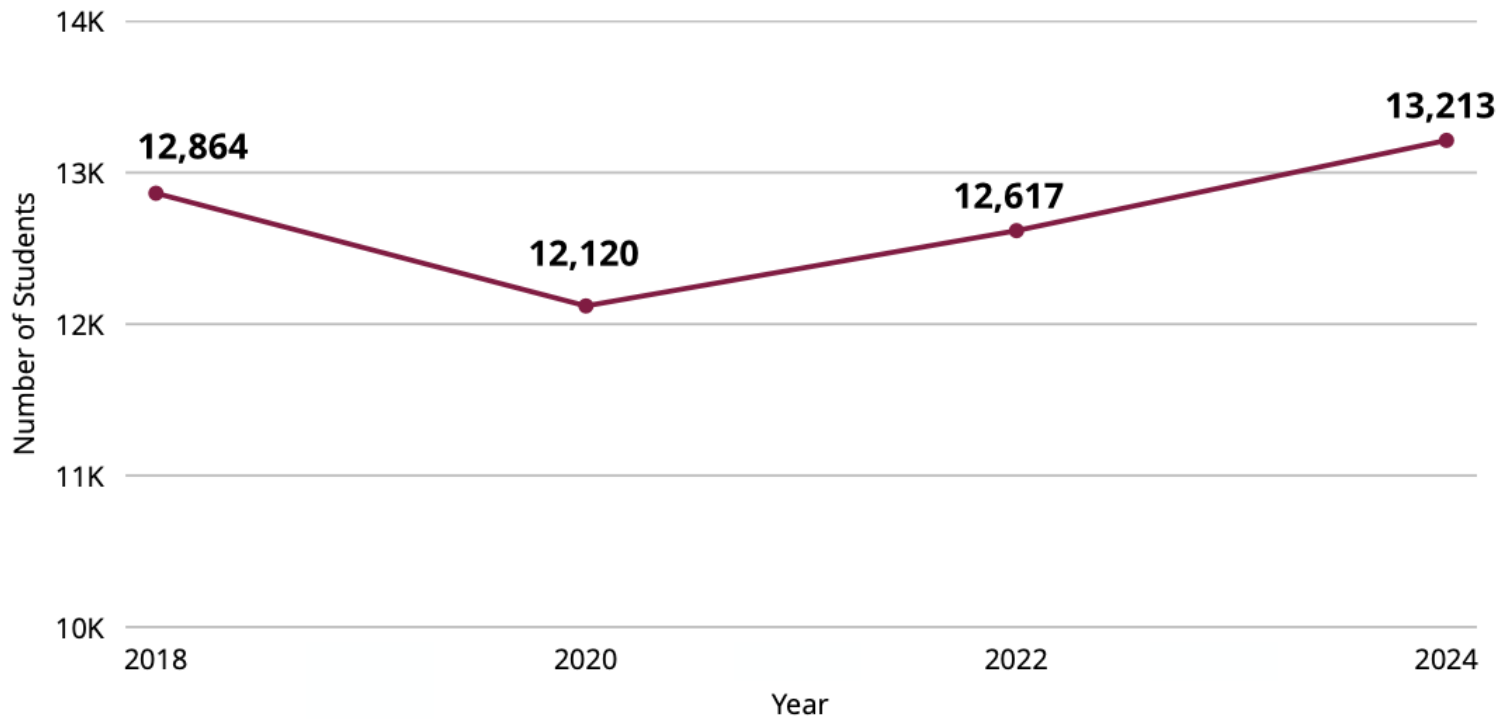
Exploring Readiness Gaps and the Transition from High School to Higher Education

A high school diploma marks an important achievement, but for students who plan to continue their education, graduation marks the beginning of the transition to postsecondary education. As we explored in our [previous newsletter](#), New Mexico is seeing historically high graduation rates. With more students graduating high school, it is important to consider what happens after students cross the graduation stage. For students who pursue postsecondary education, access, preparation, and the support they receive after enrolling can shape their ability to persist and ultimately complete their education. Looking beyond graduation provides a fuller picture of how students experience the transition to postsecondary education and the opportunities and challenges they encounter along the way.

Are More New Mexico Graduates Enrolling in College?

For many young adults, college is the next step after high school. The number of recent New Mexico high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education declined between 2018 and 2020, and has increased in each reporting period since (1). In fall 2024, 13,213 New Mexico residents enrolled as first-time, degree-seeking undergraduates after graduating from high school within the previous 12 months.

Recent New Mexico High School Graduates Enrolling in Postsecondary Education, 2018-2024



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment component, 2018–2024. 2024 data are provisional.

Enrollment, however, is only the first step toward postsecondary success. Students may encounter a range of challenges during the transition to higher education, including navigating the cost of attendance and adjusting to the emotional and academic demands of college (2). Financial support plays an important role in making college accessible. The Opportunity Scholarship has expanded access to tuition-free education for a broader range of students, including returning adult learners and those attending part-time (3). However, access alone does not guarantee success. Once students enroll, academic preparation and continued institutional support also play important roles in their ability to persist and complete their education.

Are Students Prepared for College?

One indicator of college readiness is whether students require remediation, sometimes referred to as developmental education. Remedial courses provide additional instruction in areas such as math, reading, or writing for students who are not yet prepared for college-level coursework (4).

Among recent New Mexico high school graduates who enrolled as first-time freshmen at the state's two-year public colleges in summer or fall 2025, 42% enrolled in at least one remedial course in math, reading, or writing, including co-requisite courses (5).



Source: New Mexico Higher Education Department, College Remediation.

This means that for many students, the transition to college includes receiving additional academic support alongside or before completing college-level coursework.

Remediation rates also vary across student groups. Across New Mexico's public two- and four-year colleges, remediation rates among first-time freshmen from New Mexico high schools in academic year 2021–22 were 41% for Black/African American students, 32% for Native American students, 32% for Hispanic students, and 30% for White students (6). These differences highlight disparities in students' experiences and preparation for postsecondary education, as well as the importance of equitable access to the pathways, opportunities, and support that help students successfully transition to higher education.

From Readiness to Success

Being prepared to enter college is only one part of the transition; continued enrollment is another important measure of postsecondary success. Among full-time, first-time students who entered Doña Ana Community College (DACC) in fall 2023, 63% returned in fall 2024, similar to the national rate of 64% at public two-year institutions (7, 8). At New Mexico State University (NMSU), 73% of full-time, first-time bachelor's degree-seeking students who entered in fall 2023 returned in fall 2024, compared with 82% nationally at public four-year institutions. While year-to-year retention provides one measure of postsecondary progress, longer-term completion provides another important perspective.

Looking more broadly at postsecondary completion, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data show that 48% of New Mexico students in the fall 2019 entering cohort completed a postsecondary credential within six years, compared with 61% nationally (9). These outcomes show why the transition from high school to higher education cannot be measured by enrollment alone. Strengthening the transition therefore requires attention to the full pathway: helping students access college, ensuring they are prepared when they arrive, and providing the support they need to remain enrolled and complete their education.

What Helps Students Succeed After High School?

Preparing students for college and career starts before they graduate. Opportunities to experience college-level coursework, explore careers, and apply classroom learning in real-world settings can help students become familiar with the expectations they will face after high school. Across New Mexico, programs such as dual credit (DC), work-based learning (WBL), and Career and Technical Education (CTE) provide students with these experiences.

Research cited by the New Mexico Higher Education Department (NMHED) has found that students who participate in dual credit have higher high school graduation rates, lower rates of first-semester remediation, and higher four-year college completion rates than their peers (10). Under New Mexico state law, public colleges waive tuition for dual-credit students and local education agencies provide instructional materials. However, students and families may still be responsible for course fees and transportation expenses.

Research from the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation emphasizes that programs such as DC, CTE, and WBL can be most effective when they are connected rather than treated as individual opportunities (11). For example, aligning CTE with core academic coursework and incorporating WBL into classroom learning allow students to see how what they learn in school connects to college, careers, and their lives beyond graduation.

Conclusion

High school graduation provides an important foundation for future educational and career opportunities. However, enrollment and remediation data show that the transition from high school to postsecondary education is not equally straightforward for all students. Examining disparities in college readiness, the barriers students encounter, and the educational experiences and supports associated with stronger outcomes can help policymakers, educators, and families strengthen transitions from high school to college and careers.

Sources:

- (1) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment component, 2018–2024. 2024 data are provisional.
- (2) [New Mexico high schools are graduating more students. Are they ready for college?](#)
- (3) [NM college enrollment, retention and completion increase thanks to Opportunity Scholarship](#)
- (4) [College Remediation Definition and Meaning](#)
- (5) [New Mexico Higher Education Department, College Remediation](#)
- (6) [New Mexico Higher Education Department, Retention and Graduation Data from New Mexico's Public Higher Education Institutions](#)
- (7) [U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator — New Mexico State University—Doña Ana and New Mexico State University—Main Campus retention rates, Fall 2023 to Fall 2024](#)
- (8) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Full-time retention rates for public two-year and public four-year institutions, Fall 2024. 2024 data are provisional.
- (9) [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Yearly Progress and Completion, Fall 2019 Cohort, all starting sectors.](#)
- (10) [New Mexico Higher Education Department, New Mexico Dual Credit Program](#)
- (11) [New Mexico Comprehensive College and Career Pathways Assessment Report](#)



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