

1.5 Financial Aid

Increase need-based financial aid in order to improve access to higher education for Nebraskans with limited financial means.

The 2003 LR 174 Higher Education Task Force recommended increasing need-based financial aid as a means of improving access to higher education for Nebraskans with limited financial resources. Since 2003, Nebraska has increased the amount of state funds allocated for need-based financial aid, thereby making progress toward the goal of improving access to higher education within the state.¹⁶ However, it still ranks among the lowest states for state-funded, need-based aid provided to students.

Financial aid is even more important today than it was in 2003 as increasing college costs make it more difficult for many Nebraskans to be educated beyond high school. While there are several sources of need-based financial aid available to students, the amount available has not kept up with increasing costs and the corresponding need for more financial aid. This can be illustrated in several ways.

Number of Nebraska High School Seniors Filing the FAFSA

The first step in gaining access to federal and state student financial aid – and often need-based institutional financial aid as well – is filing the Free Application for Student Financial Aid, commonly known as the FAFSA. Unfortunately, many potential college students never make it past this first step, either not applying at all or not completing the FAFSA despite the efforts of high school counselors, college financial aid officers, and organizations like EducationQuest, Avenue Scholars, and College Possible that help students complete the FAFSA. The National College Access Network (NCAN), a national organization devoted to advocating for college affordability, particularly the federal Pell Grant program, estimates the Nebraska high school class of 2024 missed out on over \$27.5 million in federal Pell grants by not filing the FAFSA.¹⁷ Without that aid, most of those students could not enroll in college.

As [Figure 1.5.1](#) indicates, Nebraska ranked ninth in FAFSA completions for high school seniors in the class of 2025. Leading states typically have made FAFSA completion a high school graduation requirement, tie FAFSA completion to “free college,” or have extensive state aid programs. Nebraska currently has extensive outreach of EducationQuest and the CCPE’s FAFSA Completion Project, which uses information from the federal Department of Education to allow high school counselors to see which of their students have started and completed a FAFSA, allowing them to target assistance and encouragement. Beginning with the 2024-2025 school year, Nebraska public high school students must complete the FAFSA or opt out prior to graduating from high school.¹⁸

Like most states, Nebraska suffered declines in FAFSA completions by high school seniors in recent years, which corresponded to declines in college going among recent high school graduates. FAFSA completion and college continuation among low-income students nationwide were heavily impacted by COVID-19, as distance education was difficult for low-income students without good access to technology at home and counselors were less able to

¹⁶ For more information on tuition, fees, and financial aid, see the *2024 Tuition, Fees, and College Affordability Report*, available on the Commission’s website at ccpe.nebraska.gov/reports.

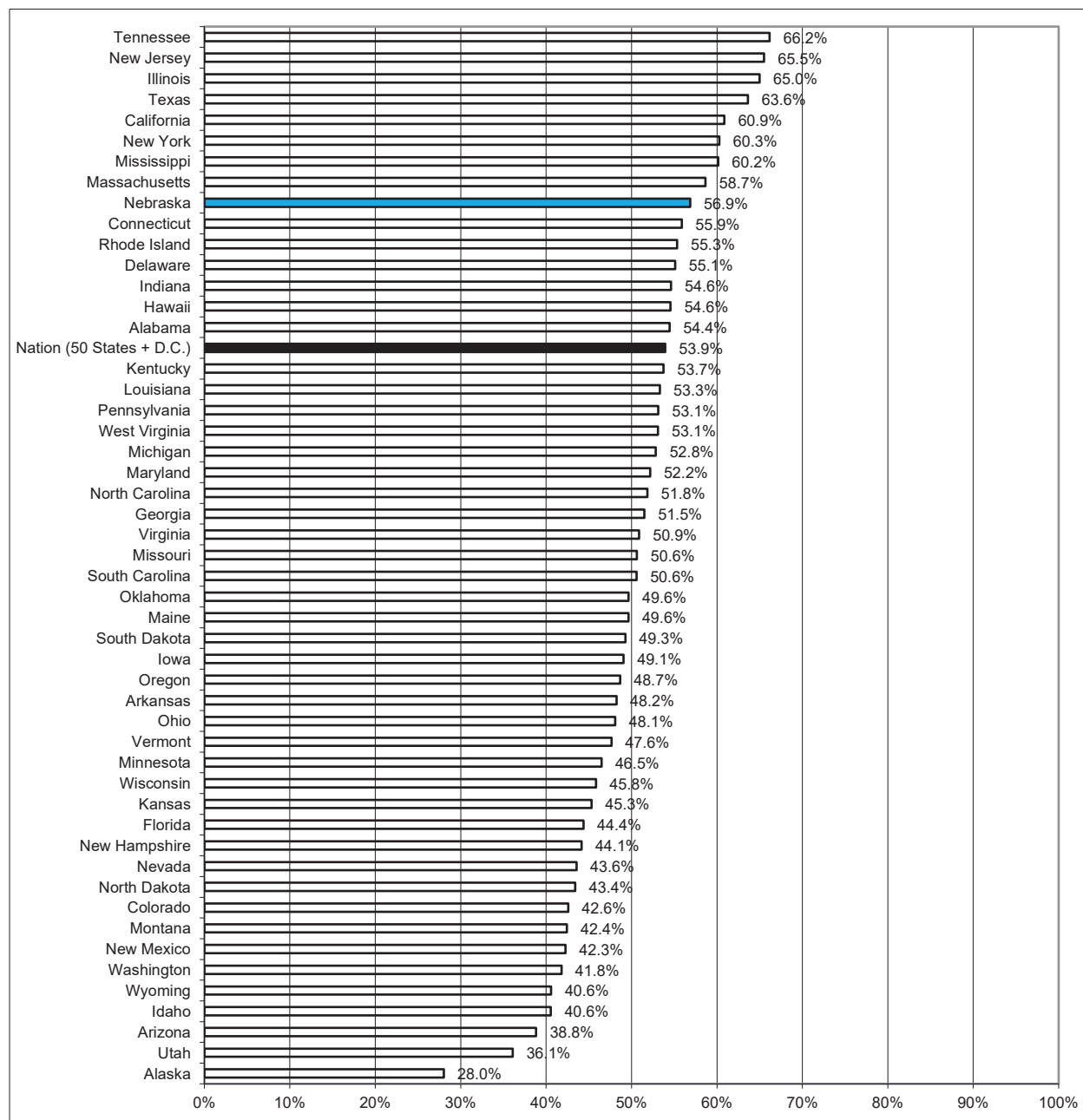
¹⁷ *New Report Highlights Benefit of Pell Grant for Students and States*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.ncan.org/news/698621/New-Report-Highlights-Benefit-of-Pell-Grant-for-Students-and-States.htm>.

¹⁸ See Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-729 (3) for exemptions to the FAFSA completion requirement, available at <https://nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/statutes.php?statute=79-729>.

assist students with college planning and FAFSA completion. Additionally, the new FAFSA form experienced numerous technical issues and delays for the class of 2024, leading to a national decline of 7.6 percentage points over the prior year (from 53.4% to 46.0%). However, the most recent data reveals a large rebound for the class of 2025, increasing 7.9 percentage points nationally (from 46.0% to 53.9%). Notably, Nebraska had the largest increase nationally between 2024 and 2025 (14.8 percentage points). [Figure 1.5.2](#) shows the FAFSA completion rates for Nebraska, neighboring states, and the best and worst performing states in FAFSA completion.

Figure 1.5.1

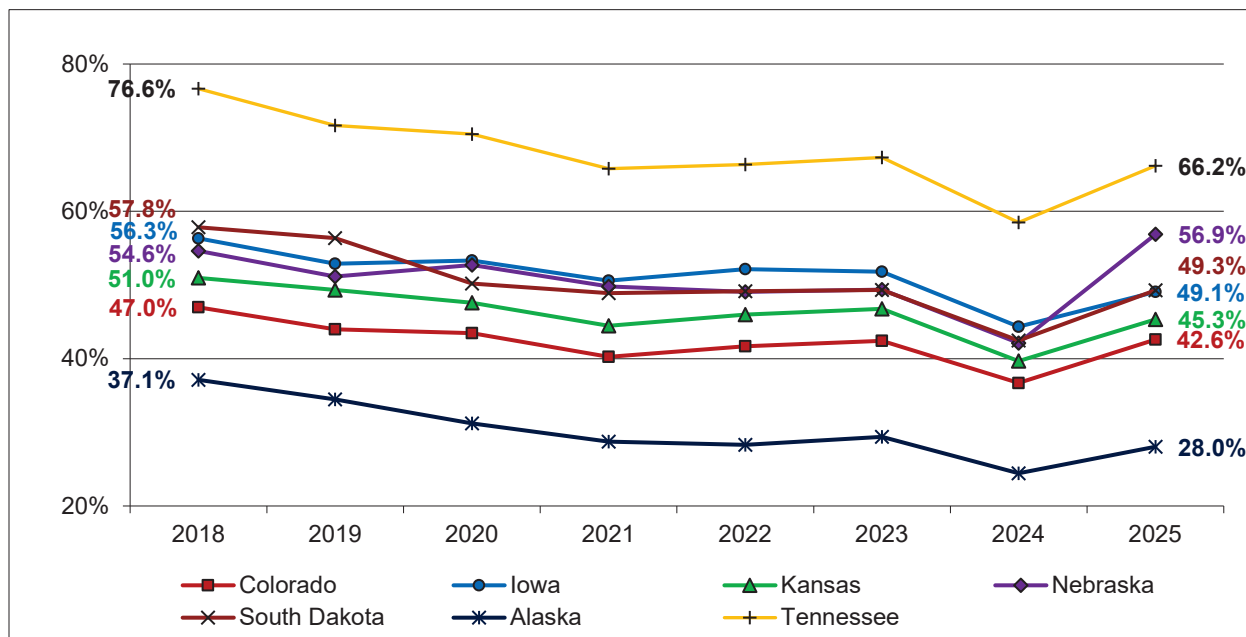
**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Rates by State
High School Seniors in the Class of 2025**



Note. Includes students who completed the FAFSA between October 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025. Includes students from public and private high schools. See [Table A8.1](#) in [Appendix 8](#) for more information. Data source: National College Attainment Network, FAFSA Completion, January 2026.

Figure 1.5.2

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Rates
Nebraska Compared to Other States
High School Seniors in the Class of 2018 through the Class of 2025**



Note. Graph includes trend data for Nebraska, surrounding states, and the lowest (Alaska) and highest (Tennessee) performing states for the most recent year. Includes students who completed the FAFSA between October 1 and June 30 for each high school class. Includes students from public and private high schools. See [Table A8.1](#) in [Appendix 8](#) for more information. Data source: National College Attainment Network, FAFSA Completion, January 2026.

Number of Students Not Served by Nebraska’s Opportunity Grant Program

Nebraska allocates state General and lottery funds to the Nebraska Opportunity Grant (NOG) program, Nebraska’s only state-wide, need-based financial aid program. Nebraska Opportunity Grants are awarded to students who are residents of Nebraska, have not earned a first bachelor’s degree, have high financial need, and who are attending eligible Nebraska colleges and universities.¹⁹

As the following discussion illustrates, Nebraska has significantly increased the amount of funding available for Nebraska Opportunity Grants to college students. However, the amount of available funding for financial aid continues to be insufficient to meet the needs of an increasing number of students who are eligible to receive state assistance. As a result, only 4 out of 10 students who are eligible for state-funded financial aid receive Nebraska Opportunity Grants.

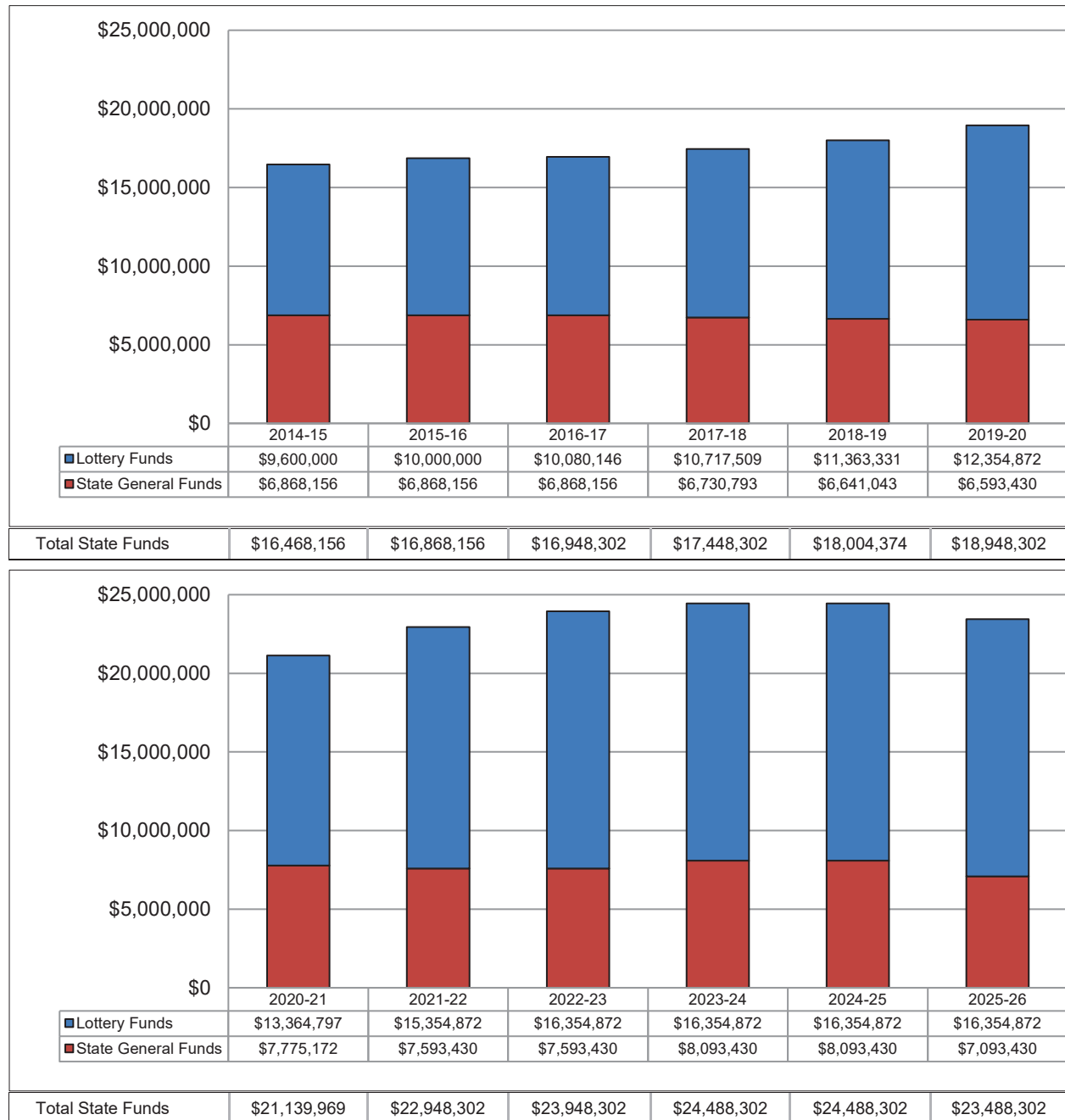
[Figure 1.5.3](#) illustrates how the amount of available funding for NOG has significantly increased since 2014-2015. For the 2014-2015 academic year, the state allocated \$16,468,156 for grant aid to students attending public and private institutions in Nebraska. For 2024-2025, the state allocated \$24,448,302 to assist students from low-income families attend higher education institutions in Nebraska, an increase of 48.5%. For the 2025-2026 academic year, the amount of available state funding for grant aid decreased to \$23,448,302. Therefore,

¹⁹ For more information on the Nebraska Opportunity Grant, see the *Nebraska Opportunity Grant 2024-25 Year-End Report*, available on the Commission’s website at ccpe.nebraska.gov/reports.

available state funding for student financial aid in 2025-2026 is 42.4% higher than the state appropriated for student financial aid in 2014-2015.

Between 2014-2015 and 2025-2026, allocation of lottery funds for NOG increased 70.4%, from \$9,600,000 in 2014-2015 to \$16,354,872 in 2025-2026. Over the same period, appropriations for NOG from the state's General Fund increased 3.3%, from \$6,868,156 to \$7,093,430.

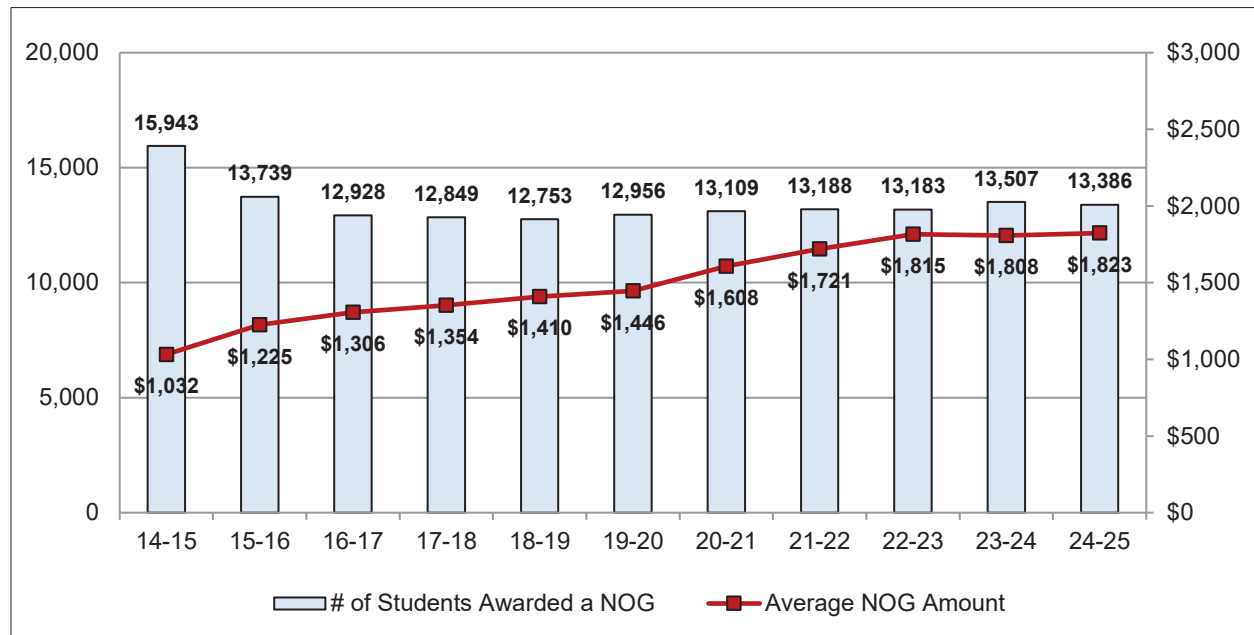
Figure 1.5.3
Sources and Amounts of Available Funding
for the Nebraska Opportunity Grant Program
2014-2015 through 2025-2026



Data sources: Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, *2024 Tuition, Fees, and College Affordability Report*, supplemented with CCPE records, December 2025.

Between 2014-2015 and 2024-2025, as shown in [Figure 1.5.4](#), the number of students who received NOG decreased 16.0%, from 15,943 to 13,386, and the average awarded grant increased 76.7%, from \$1,032 to \$1,823.²⁰

Figure 1.5.4
Number of Students Who Received
Nebraska Opportunity Grants (NOGs) and the Average Grant Awarded
2014-2015 through 2024-2025



Data source: Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, *Nebraska Opportunity Grant Year-End Report*, 2015 through 2025.

Unfortunately, as shown in [Figure 1.5.5](#), many students who are eligible for Nebraska Opportunity Grants do not receive them. In 2024-2025, for example, 13,386 students received a NOG. However, based upon expenditure reports submitted to the Commission by each institution, it is estimated that an additional 17,799 students qualified for NOG but did not receive a NOG due to insufficient available funding.

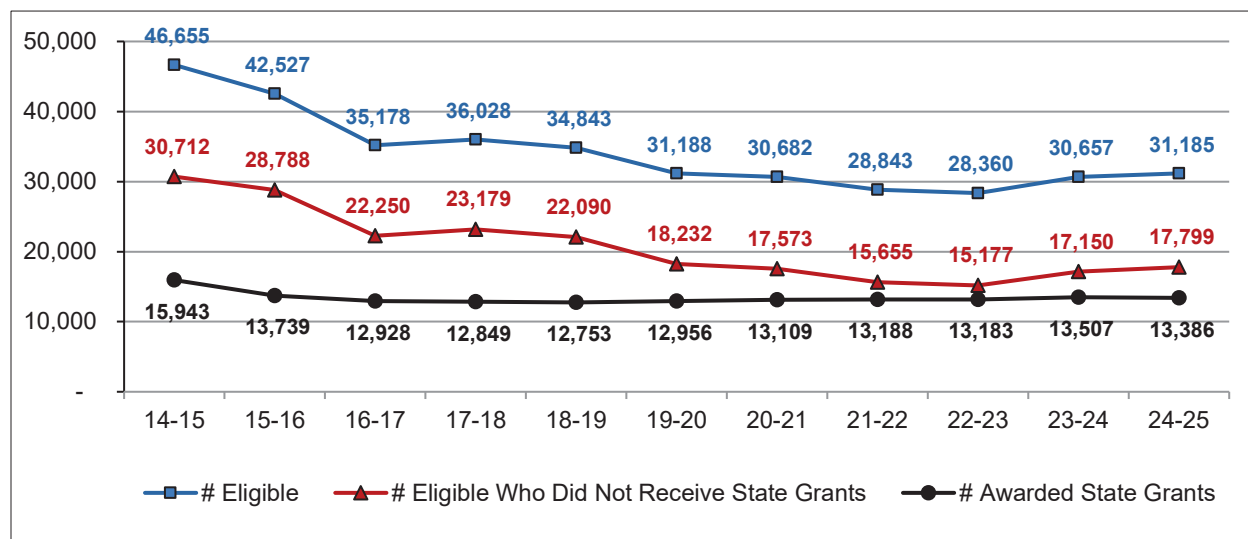
Furthermore, while the percentage of eligible students who receive Nebraska Opportunity Grants has increased, it remains low. In 2014-2015, only 34.2% of the students who were eligible for NOGs received them. In 2024-2025, 42.9% of the eligible students received Nebraska Opportunity Grants.

See [Table A8.2](#) and [Table A8.3](#) in [Appendix 8](#) for supporting data and for additional information about the numbers and amounts of Nebraska Opportunity Grants awarded by sector.

²⁰ The maximum award a student could receive was 50% of the tuition and mandatory fees charged by UNL to a full-time, Nebraska-resident undergraduate student. In 2014-2015, the maximum award was \$3,987. For 2024-2025, the maximum award was \$5,168.

Figure 1.5.5

Number of Students Eligible to Receive Nebraska Opportunity Grants Compared to the Number of Students Awarded a Nebraska Opportunity Grant 2014-2015 through 2024-2025



Data source: Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, *Nebraska Opportunity Grant Year-End Report*, 2015 through 2025.

Other Evidence of Unmet Need for Financial Aid

Although state funding of financial aid has increased significantly since 2014-2015, there is a substantial amount of unmet financial need in Nebraska, including the need not met by Nebraska Opportunity Grants. The Commission estimates the annual unmet financial need of all Nebraskans who are eligible for Pell Grants by subtracting the total amount of financial aid, excluding work-study or Direct Parent PLUS (parent loan for undergraduate students), from the total cost of attending Nebraska colleges and universities for all Pell-Grant-eligible students.²¹ Using this formula, which includes subsidized and unsubsidized loans as financial aid, the Commission estimates the unmet need of Nebraskans was over \$227 million in 2014-2015 and nearly \$264 million in 2024-2025.²²

Another indicator of the difficulty in meeting the financial needs of students is the percentage of family income needed to pay for full-time enrollment at public two- and four-year institutions. While students from families with median incomes needed 11% of their family income to pay for full-time enrollment at public two-year institutions in 2021-22, students from low-income families needed 19% of their family income to pay for full-time enrollment at public two-year institutions. For more details, see page 1 of the Commission’s *2025 Measuring Accomplishments* report.

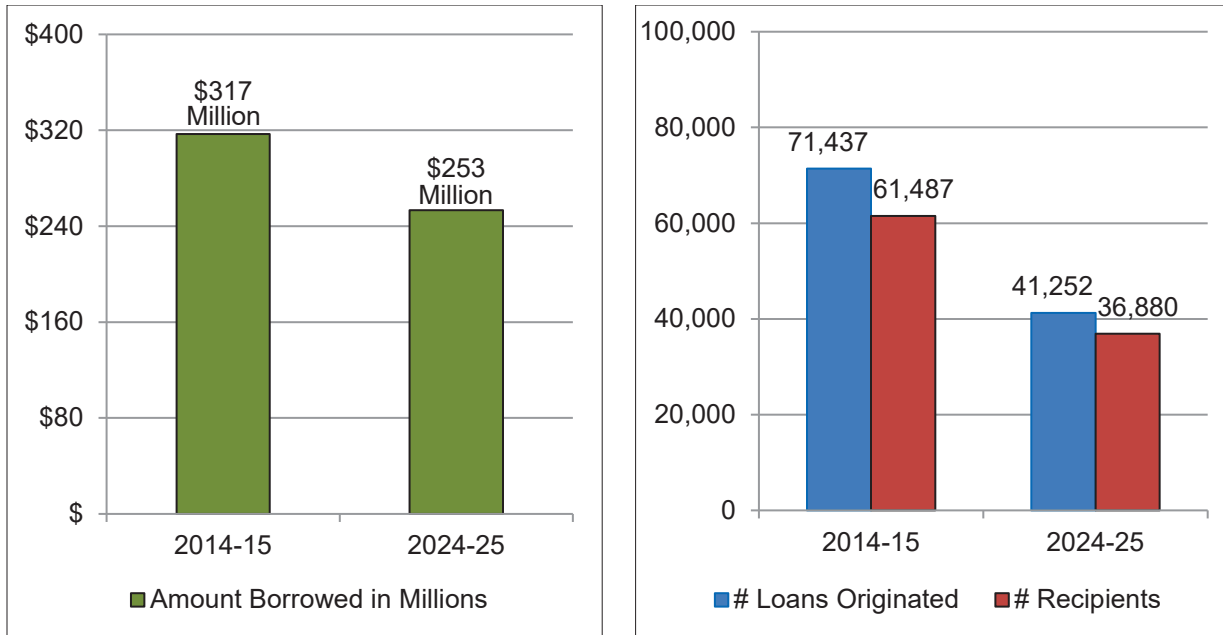
As illustrated in [Figure 1.5.6](#), the amount students borrowed to attend Nebraska’s public postsecondary institutions decreased 20.1%, from \$316,771,834 in 2014-2015 to \$253,256,482 in 2024-2025.²³ The number of loan recipients decreased 40.0%, from 61,487 in 2014-2015 to 36,880 in 2024-2025, while the number of originated loans decreased 42.3%, from 71,437 in 2014-2015 to 41,252 in 2024-2025.

²¹ Cost of attendance includes tuition and mandatory fees, room and board, and books and supplies.

²² For details regarding these estimates, see the Commission’s *2024 Tuition, Fees, and College Affordability Report*, available on the Commission’s website at ccpe.nebraska.gov/reports.

²³ Originated loans, including fees.

Figure 1.5.6
Level of Student Borrowing to Attend Nebraska’s Public Colleges and Universities
2024-2025 Compared to 2014-2015



Note. Includes all undergraduate and graduate Direct Loans (DL Subsidized, DL Unsubsidized-Undergraduate, DL Unsubsidized-Graduate, DL Parent Plus, and DL Grad Plus). Recipients may be duplicated across the five separate loan programs. Data source: U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, Title IV Program Volume Reports, 2025.

Need-Based Financial Aid

In addition to the Nebraska Opportunity Grant, financial aid is provided through a system of tuition waivers at Nebraska public institutions. However, tuition waivers may or may not be need-based, depending on how each institution decides to allocate them.

The State of Nebraska also funds the Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program. Initiated in fall 2007, ACE scholarships are awarded to eligible low-income Nebraska high school students who take college courses for credit from qualified postsecondary institutions.

Since the Nebraska Opportunity Grant program has been the primary source of state-funded, need-based financial aid for Nebraska residents who are attending postsecondary institutions within the state, the preceding analysis in this section focuses primarily on the changes in the funding of Nebraska’s Opportunity Grant program that occurred between 2014-2015 and 2024-2025. The last part of this section focuses on the growth of the Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program and the college continuation rates of ACE scholarship recipients.

Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program

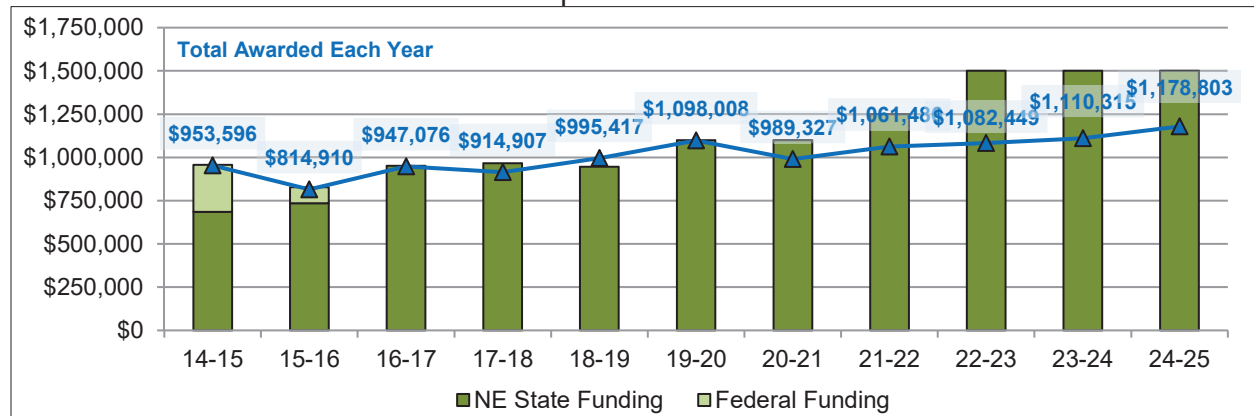
Started in fall 2007, the Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program awards scholarships to eligible low-income Nebraska high school students who take courses for credit from postsecondary institutions while the students are in high school. These courses are typically dual enrollment courses, which are offered for both high school and college credit, but some are college courses offered only for college credit.²⁴ Figure 1.5.7 illustrates the growth of the ACE Scholarship Program.

- In 2014-2015, 4,082 ACE scholarships totaling \$953,596 were awarded to 1,919 Nebraska high school students from 2111 high schools. These students registered for 13,785 credit hours at 18 Nebraska colleges and universities.

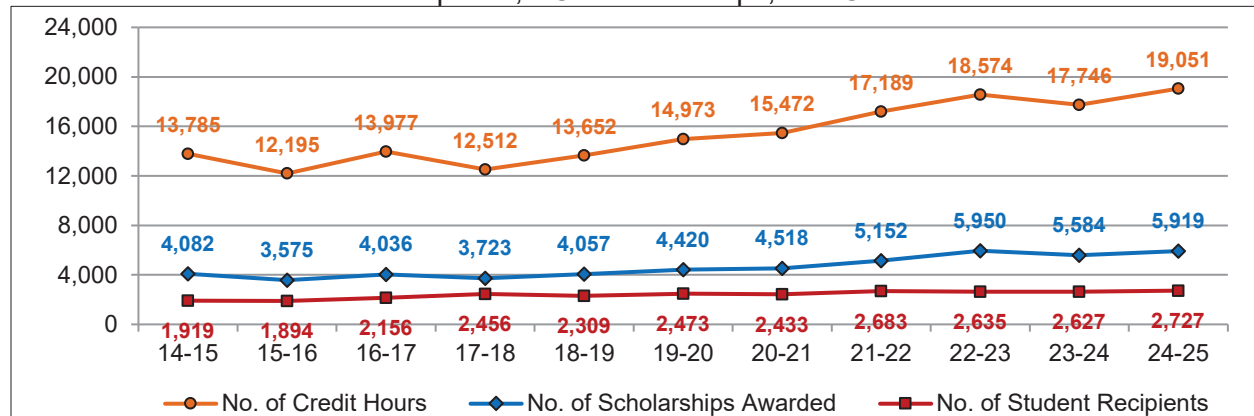
Figure 1.5.7

Growth of the Nebraska Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program 2014-2015 through 2024-2025

Part A: Sources and Amount of Scholarships Awarded



Part B: Numbers of Student Recipients, ACE Scholarships, and Credit Hours



Note. The number of scholarships awarded to a student is limited each year based on available funding and an estimated number of students who will be applying. For 2024-2025, due to the available funding and reduction in charges at the community colleges, there was no limit to the number of scholarships available per student. See Table A8.4 in Appendix 8 for supporting data. Data source: Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, *Access College Early Scholarship Year-End Report*, 2015 through 2025.

²⁴ For more information on the Access College Early Scholarship, see the *Access College Early Scholarship 2024-25 Year-End Report*, available on the Commission's website at ccpe.nebraska.gov/reports.

- In 2024-2025, 5,919 ACE scholarships totaling \$1,178,803 were awarded to 2,727 Nebraska high school students from 196 high schools. These students registered for 19,051 credit hours at 19 Nebraska colleges and universities. A total of \$1,400,000 is appropriated for ACE scholarships for 2025-2026.

College Continuation Rates of ACE Scholarship Recipients

Since 2009, the Coordinating Commission has conducted research to determine how many of the public high school seniors who receive ACE scholarships continue on to college compared to other low-income and non-low-income graduates of Nebraska's public high schools.

For this research, a college continuation rate is defined as the percentage of public high school graduates who were enrolled in college within one year of their high school graduation. For example, for the public high school seniors who received ACE scholarships during 2023-2024, the college continuation rate is the percentage of these students who were enrolled in college any time between June 1, 2024, and May 31, 2025.²⁵ Throughout this summary, the terms college continuation rate and college-going rate are used interchangeably.

Using student records and summary reports from the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and enrollment records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the Commission calculates the college continuation rates by sex for the public high school seniors who were ACE scholarship recipients.

The Commission then compares the college continuation rates for the seniors who received ACE scholarships while attending public high schools to the college continuation rates for other low-income and non-low-income graduates of Nebraska's public high schools.²⁶

Low-income students are defined as students who are approved to receive free or reduced-price school lunches. Effective with the 2021-2022 cohort, students are also classified as low income if they graduate from a school that participates in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Non-low-income students are students who are not approved for free or reduced-price school lunches.²⁷

Since the Commission relies on college enrollment records from the NSC, students who continue on to college at non-NSC-reporting institutions are classified as not continuing on to college. As a result, college continuation rates reported here are underestimated to some degree. (See Section 1.1.c of this report for further information on college continuation rates.)

²⁵ While May 31st of the year following high school graduation is the cut-off date for college continuation rates in this section, the actual date may be slightly earlier, depending on when the Nebraska Department of Education submits data to the National Student Clearinghouse. See Table A8.5.a through Table A8.6.h in Appendix 8 for more information.

²⁶ Metropolitan Community College did not participate in ACE during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. Northeast Community College did not participate in ACE during the 2023-24 academic year. High school students taking coursework through these colleges were not charged tuition and fees during the respective academic years.

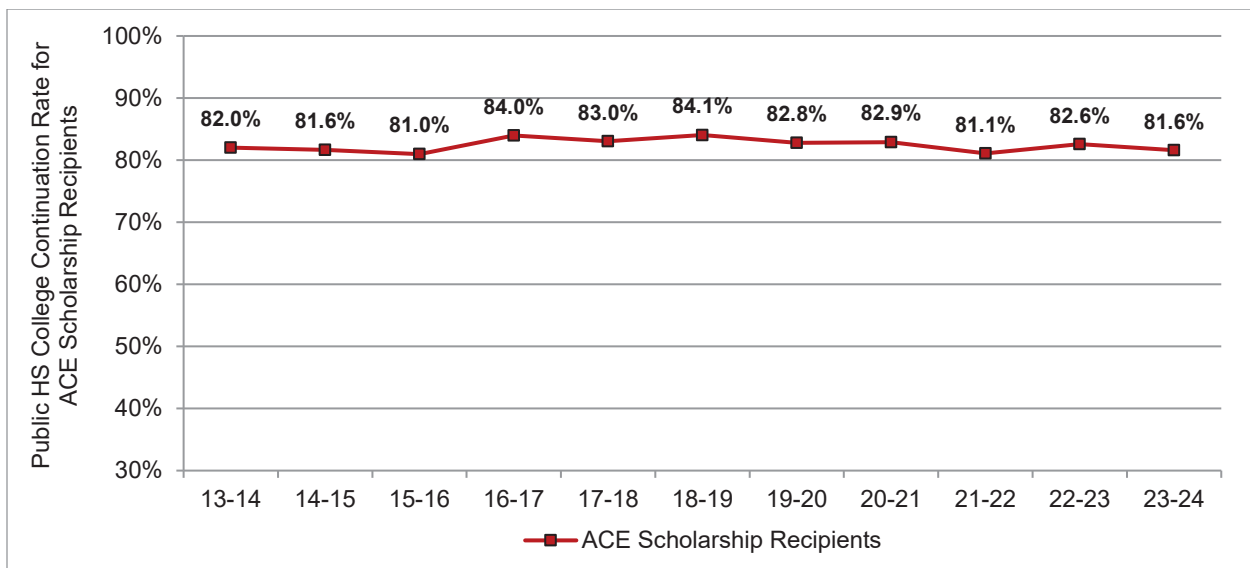
²⁷ The non-low-income students include students in low-income households that have not applied for free or reduced-price school lunches. Conversely, the low-income students in this study include at least some students who graduated from schools that participate in the CEP but were from non-low-income households.

Students who were home-schooled or attended nonpublic (private) high schools are not included in this phase of the research because the NDE does not have sufficient records for the Commission to compute college continuation rates for nonpublic high school students by income status.

College Continuation Rates for Public High School Graduates Who Received ACE Scholarships

- As shown in [Section 1.1.c](#), [Figure 1.1.c.5](#), the college continuation rate for Nebraska public high school graduates has decreased from 71.5% for the 2013-2014 graduating class to 63.5% for the 2023-2024 graduating class.
- As shown in [Figure 1.5.8](#), the college continuation rate for all public high school graduates who received ACE scholarships during their senior year has varied by year.
- Since 2013-2014, the college-going rate for ACE scholarship recipients decreased slightly from 82.0% to 81.6% for 2023-2024 graduates.

Figure 1.5.8
College Continuation Rates for All Public High School Graduates
Who Received Access College Early (ACE) Scholarships
2013-2014 through 2023-2024



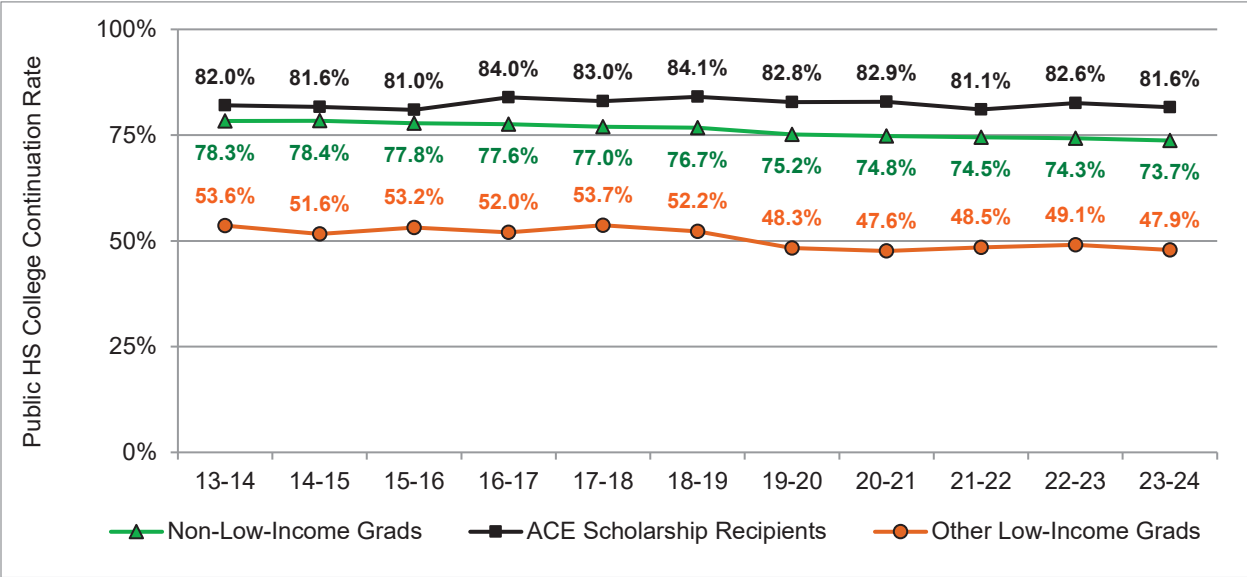
Note. See [Tables A8.5.a](#), [A8.5.b](#), [A8.5.c](#), [A8.6.a](#), [A8.6.b](#), [A8.6.c](#), [A8.6.d](#), [A8.6.e](#), [A8.6.f](#), [A8.6.g](#), and [A8.6.h](#) in [Appendix 8](#) for supporting data. Data sources: Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education (ACE recipient data), July 2025; National Student Clearinghouse (college continuation data), June 2025; and Nebraska Department of Education (public high school graduate data), July 2025.

College Continuation Rates by Household Income

- As shown in [Figure 1.5.9](#), college continuation rates of ACE scholarship recipients have been higher than the rates for non-low-income graduates of the state’s public high schools.
- College continuation rates for ACE scholarship recipients were significantly higher than the college-going rates for other low-income students who graduated from Nebraska’s public high schools between 2013-2014 and 2023-2024.
- Since 2013-2014, the college continuation rate decreased 0.4 percentage points for ACE scholarship recipients, 4.6 percentage points for non-low-income graduates, and 5.7 percentage points for other low-income graduates.

Figure 1.5.9

College Continuation Rates for Public High School Seniors Who Received Access Early (ACE) Scholarships and Other Graduates of Nebraska Public High Schools by Student Income Status: 2013-2014 through 2023-2024



Note. See [Tables A8.5.a, A8.5.b, A8.5.c, A8.6.a, A8.6.b, A8.6.c, A8.6.d, A8.6.e, A8.6.f, A8.6g, and A8.6h](#) in [Appendix 8](#) for supporting data. Data sources: Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education (ACE recipient data), July 2025; National Student Clearinghouse (college continuation data), June 2025; and Nebraska Department of Education (public high school graduate data), July 2025.

NSWERS ACE Scholarship Program Evaluation

In late 2025, the Nebraska Statewide Workforce and Educational Reporting System (NSWERS) completed an evaluation on the impact of the ACE scholarship program on public high school performance and postsecondary outcomes. This project used propensity score matching to control for differences between ACE participants and non-participants to estimate the treatment effects of the ACE scholarship program.

College going rates were analyzed using 2018 through 2023 public high school graduates. Before adjusting for pre-existing differences between ACE recipients and non-ACE recipients, NSWERS reported a 19 percentage point difference between ACE recipients (83%) and non-ACE recipients (64%) for college-going rates. After adjusting the data through

propensity score matching to account for pre-existing differences, ACE recipients were 11 percentage points more likely to go to college than non-ACE recipients.

ACE recipients were slightly more likely to persist at four-year institutions (2 percentage point adjusted increase) and two-year institutions (4 percentage point adjusted increase) than non-ACE recipients.²⁸ While ACE recipients had a 2 percentage point adjusted increase in completion rates at four-year institutions compared to non-ACE participants, the difference was not statistically significant. At two-year institutions, ACE recipients had a 5 percentage point adjusted increase in completion rates than non-ACE participants.²⁹

The NSWERS evaluation concludes that the ACE program has a statistically significant positive impact on college-going rates, postsecondary persistence at both two-year and four-year institutions, and postsecondary completion at two-year institutions. While the impact on postsecondary completion at four-year institutions was not statistically significant, the trend was positive.³⁰

²⁸ Includes 2018 through 2022 cohort years.

²⁹ Includes 2018 and 2019 cohort years for four-year institutions and 2018 through 2021 cohort years for two-year institutions.

³⁰ For more information, see the full *2025 Access College Early (ACE) Scholarship Program Evaluation*, available at <https://insights.nswers.org/evaluations/ace-2025/>.