

Three-year degree attainment at the University of California

The University of California (UC) established ambitious UC 2030 goals, including improving timely graduation rates to promote affordability and improve student outcomes. As UC four-year graduation rates have increased, so have three-year graduation rates which are now at a historic high.

This briefing provides background on the Budget Framework Agreement *Three-Year Degree Pathway Project*, highlights other institutional efforts to promote early graduation, and examines the pros and cons of completing a degree in three years. It also explores which UC students graduate in three years, where and how this occurs, and how these students fare after graduation.

Three-Year Degree Pathways Project

Interest in three-year graduation and accelerated “three-year degree pathways” is not new. As part of the Budget Framework Agreement (BFA) in 2015–16, then UC President Janet Napolitano and Governor Jerry Brown agreed to expand a set of campus innovations intended to improve student success and promote efficient use of resources. Alongside efforts to support four-year completion, the BFA directed campuses to develop three-year “pathways” (structured course plans and advising tools within existing degree requirements) for top majors:

Each UC undergraduate campus (except Merced) will develop three-year degree pathways for 10 out of its top 15 majors by March 1, 2016. Merced, which has far fewer majors than the other campuses, will develop three-year degree pathways for three out of its top five majors, which is proportional to what other UC campuses are expected to do. UC has committed to promoting these accelerated pathways for use by students where appropriate, with a goal that 5 percent of all UC undergraduate students will access the accelerated tracks by the summer of 2017.¹

By March 1, 2016, each UC undergraduate campus had successfully developed the required number of three-year degree pathways (10 of the top 15 majors on eight campuses, and 3 of the top 5 majors at UC Merced).² Seven campuses developed three-year degree pathways for more majors than required under the BFA (see **Appendix A**).

UC Three-Year Graduation Rates

The three-year graduation rate for entering freshman cohorts has increased from 1.8 percent in 1999 to 7.6 percent in 2022. The rate generally increased over time, with the largest gains occurring for cohorts entering between 2016 and 2018. While the three-year graduation rate for the 2020 cohort, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic, fell about one percentage point compared to the prior cohort, it rebounded to 6.4 percent for the 2021 cohort. Three-year graduation rates also vary across student groups, with first-generation students and Pell Grant recipients less likely to graduate within three years than their peers.

¹ [California Governor’s Budget May Revision](#), 2015–16 (p. 32), with UC Merced clarifying language added.

² [UC Three-Year Degree Pathways Project](#), August 2017.

Three-Year Degree Pathways: UC and Elsewhere

University of California

Three-year degree attainment at UC does not imply completing fewer requirements. Rather, it refers to completing the standard unit requirements in an accelerated timeframe: 120 semester units on UC's semester campuses (UC Berkeley and UC Merced) and 180 quarter units on the quarter-system campuses.

Common strategies that support three-year completion include entering UC with university-eligible units (e.g., AP and/or IB classes, dual enrollment), completing transferable coursework at a community college, enrolling in summer session units, and taking heavier unit loads during the academic year. Some structured three-year pathways may also require taking more units per term than average students.

UC does not currently offer standalone, publicly promoted three-year bachelor's degree programs, nor is there a systemwide advising model specific to three-year degree completion. Some campuses promote three-year pathways on campus websites, including [UCLA's Tassels to the Left](#) and [UC Santa Cruz's Three-Year Pathways](#). In most cases, campuses encourage students interested in a three-year pathway to consult directly with their academic advisors for individualized planning. However, UC Irvine *does* offer an accelerated [3+3 Articulated Program](#) in which students earn a bachelor's degree and a Juris Doctor degree in six years.

The "Comparison Eight"

A review of the "Comparison Eight" universities³ indicates that standalone, broadly applicable three-year bachelor's degree programs are uncommon. Across these institutions, undergraduate education is generally structured around a four-year, 120-credit (or equivalent) model. Where three-year completion occurs, it is typically achieved through acceleration within existing degree requirements (e.g., advanced standing credit, heavier term loads, summer enrollment) rather than through redesigned three-year degree frameworks.

Among the public universities reviewed, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign highlights accelerated combined bachelor's and master's options rather than a general-purpose three-year bachelor's degree.⁴ The University of Michigan–Ann Arbor similarly maintains a traditional four-year undergraduate structure; references to three-year "pathways" within the Michigan system function primarily as advising tools rather than formally designated three-year degree programs.

The University of Virginia (UVA) presents the closest example of institutionally supported early degree completion. Within its College of Arts & Sciences, UVA explicitly acknowledges pathways for students to complete bachelor's degrees in fewer than four years through advanced standing credit, intensive course loads, and summer or January-term enrollment. This approach does not

³ The "Comparison 8" institutions are the eight universities (University of Michigan, University of Virginia, SUNY Buffalo, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Stanford University, Yale University, Harvard University, and MIT) with which UC regularly compares faculty pay scales and student fees; this group is also recognized by the California Department of Finance as appropriate for comparison purposes.

⁴ See **Appendix B, Figure B1** for three-year graduation rates at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

constitute a separate three-year degree credential, but rather an accelerated completion option within the standard degree structure. At the University at Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo), three-year completion is primarily supported through specific accelerated pipelines, including a 3+3 bachelor's-to-Juris Doctor pathway (like UCI), rather than through a general three-year bachelor's program.

Among the private universities in the "Comparison Eight," publicly stated degree expectations and requirements continue to reflect a standard four-year undergraduate model, even though individual students may finish early through acceleration.⁵ For example, MIT explicitly frames its undergraduate program as a four-year residential experience. Harvard describes a fixed set of degree requirements typically completed across eight terms, while noting that some students complete requirements in fewer than eight terms through approved outside or summer coursework. Stanford and Yale⁶ similarly organize their degree requirements around unit or term totals consistent with a four-year model, even where individual students may graduate early under exceptional circumstances.

Overall, the landscape suggests that three-year bachelor's degrees as formal, general-purpose programs are rare and that, as at UC, early completion is generally achieved through acceleration within existing degree requirements rather than through structurally redesigned three-year degree programs.

Other Examples

Over the past two decades, several states have encouraged their public four-year institutions to explore three-year completion and, more recently, reduced-credit bachelor's degrees, with varying degrees of success and formality.⁷ These approaches typically fall into three categories: (1) accelerated completion of a standard credit bachelor's degree through pre-college and transfer credit, summer enrollment, and heavier term loads; (2) structured "three-year pathways" that package advising and course maps to support that acceleration; and (3) reduced-credit bachelor's degrees that require fewer credits than the standard bachelor's degree.

Illinois and Florida

In Illinois and Florida, three-year completion is generally pursued through acceleration within standard degree requirements rather than through broadly adopted reduced-credit bachelor's degrees. Both public university systems allow students to graduate in three years through accelerated enrollment strategies, summer coursework, and the use of transfer and advanced placement credits.

⁵ For example, Princeton University does not publicly report three-year graduation rates and, according to Princeton officials, they do not actively track three-year graduation rates. However, they estimate their three-year graduation rates are under five percent, and unlike UC, they have not noticed a recent uptick in three-year rates (personal communication, January 2026).

⁶ Like Princeton, Yale University does not track three-year graduation rates and were unable to provide estimates (personal communication, January 2026).

⁷ Murphy, P. & Cook, K. (2015, August 3). *A college degree in three years?* Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/blog/a-college-degree-in-three-years/>.

Ohio and Indiana

In Ohio, Miami University (Oxford) offers well-defined “Three-Year Pathways” for many undergraduate programs. These pathways are designed for students who enter with substantial pre-college credit (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or CLEP credits⁸) and who can enroll year-round. Majors that may be completed under this model include public health, software engineering, Spanish, sociology, quantitative economics, psychological science, among others. Ohio University also supports three-year completion through advising pathways that emphasize transfer and pre-earned credits, although these are not typically presented as distinct degree programs with modified curricular requirements.

In Indiana, Butler University has one of the most clearly articulated models, supporting three-year degree tracks across more than forty undergraduate majors through sequenced coursework and year-round enrollment rather than reduced requirements. Eligible majors span a wide range of disciplines, including accounting, computer science, economics, English, political science, sociology, and Spanish. Manchester University has also received approval to develop reduced-credit three-year bachelor’s programs, though at present these are limited to pre-athletic training and pre-physical therapy, with broader offerings still emerging.

Arizona

In Arizona, three-year bachelor’s options exist but are less uniformly formalized. Arizona State University promotes accelerated bachelor’s programs that allow students to earn a bachelor’s degree in three years through advising and accelerated course planning, while still meeting standard degree requirements. However, other institutions in the state offer reduced-credit bachelor’s degrees or applied bachelor’s degrees designed for three-year completion. For example, Northern Arizona University offers genuine three-year bachelor’s degrees requiring approximately 90 credits in fields such as hospitality business administration and engineering technology. Yavapai College has launched a 92-credit Bachelor of Applied Science in Business designed explicitly for three-year completion, marking one of the more concrete examples of a reduced-credit bachelor’s degree in the state.

Appendix B provides a table summarizing these efforts and their structures.

Pros and Cons of Attaining a Three-Year Degree

Proponents of three-year degree attainment contend that accelerated pathways can reduce student costs and increase institutional capacity. Students completing a bachelor’s degree in three years instead of four can reduce their cost of attendance by roughly one year of expenses, but the size of those savings varies based on tuition and fee policies, housing, summer enrollment costs, and credits earned before matriculation. In addition, earlier entry into the workforce may increase lifetime earnings, although impacts vary by major, labor market conditions, and whether students would otherwise enroll in graduate or professional education.

⁸ CLEP stands for the College-Level Examination Program, administered by the College Board. Through CLEP, students earn college credit by passing standardized exams that test mastery of material typically covered in introductory undergraduate courses.

From an institutional perspective, if average time-to-degree were reduced from four years to three years, campuses could increase enrollment, which could allow more students to attend the UCs overall. In the simplest terms, this indicates that the number of students served could increase by one-third, but only if campuses can expand year-round instruction, increase course offerings, and remove bottlenecks in staffing and housing.

A policy brief from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, *The Three-Year Bachelor's Degree: Reform Measure or Red Herring?*, describes commonly cited benefits and drawbacks for accelerated undergraduate degree completion:

Benefits included:

- Lower opportunity costs and reduced cost of attendance
- Improved utilization of high school credit (e.g., AP, IB)
- Expedited path to graduate programs
- Improved program structure and predictability
- Improved access to work and internship opportunities

Drawbacks included:

- Work/family obligations that limit heavier course loads or year-round enrollment
- Restrictions on changing majors
- Lack of coordination with community colleges
- Limited program offerings
- Difficulty managing a higher course load

UC faculty and administrators have expressed concerns that a compressed schedule may reduce students' ability to participate in experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad programs, internships, and undergraduate research. Spring 2018 UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) asked students about why it was not likely they would graduate in three years, with top reasons being needing more than three years to achieve what they want to do in college, not knowing about the option of a three-year pathway, wanting more time for co-curricular activities, and needing more time to decide on my major or change my major.

Prior internal analysis and the data analysis in the following sections suggest that three-year degree attainment is not a broadly accessible pathway, but rather an outcome available to select UC students and often stratified by social and economic factors. Since opportunities for acceleration depend heavily on pre-college credit, financial flexibility, and available time, promoting three-year graduation as a systemwide efficiency or affordability solution may deepen existing inequities unless paired with strong upstream and within-UC supports.

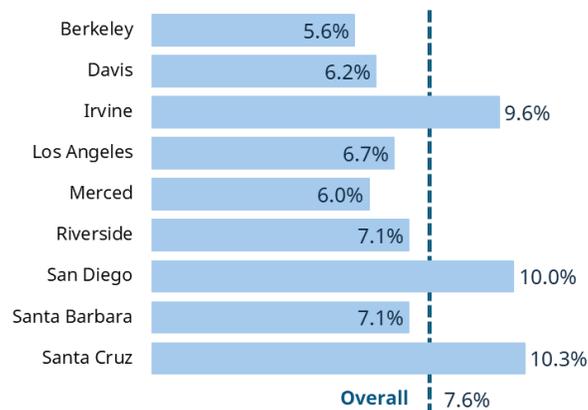
Who Graduates in Three Years?

Three-Year Graduation Rates Overall and by Campus

The systemwide three-year graduation rate across UC for the 2022 cohort was 7.6 percent (Figure 1). This rate has generally increased over time, with a notable dip for the 2020 cohort, which entered during the COVID-19 pandemic. This cohort's share of three-year graduates fell to 5.8 percent but rebounded for the 2021 cohort to 6.4 percent.

Figure 2 shows that three-year graduation rates increased across all UC campuses since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; while growth has not been uniform, it is largely consistent with pre-pandemic trends. For the 2022 cohort, campus rates ranged from 6.0 percent at UC Merced⁹ and 6.2 percent at UC Davis on the lower end to 10.0 percent at UC San Diego¹⁰ and 10.3 percent at UC Santa Cruz on the higher end, indicating substantial campus-level variation in three-year completion.

Figure 1. Three-year graduation rates by campus (2022 cohort). Dashed line indicates systemwide three-year graduation rate.

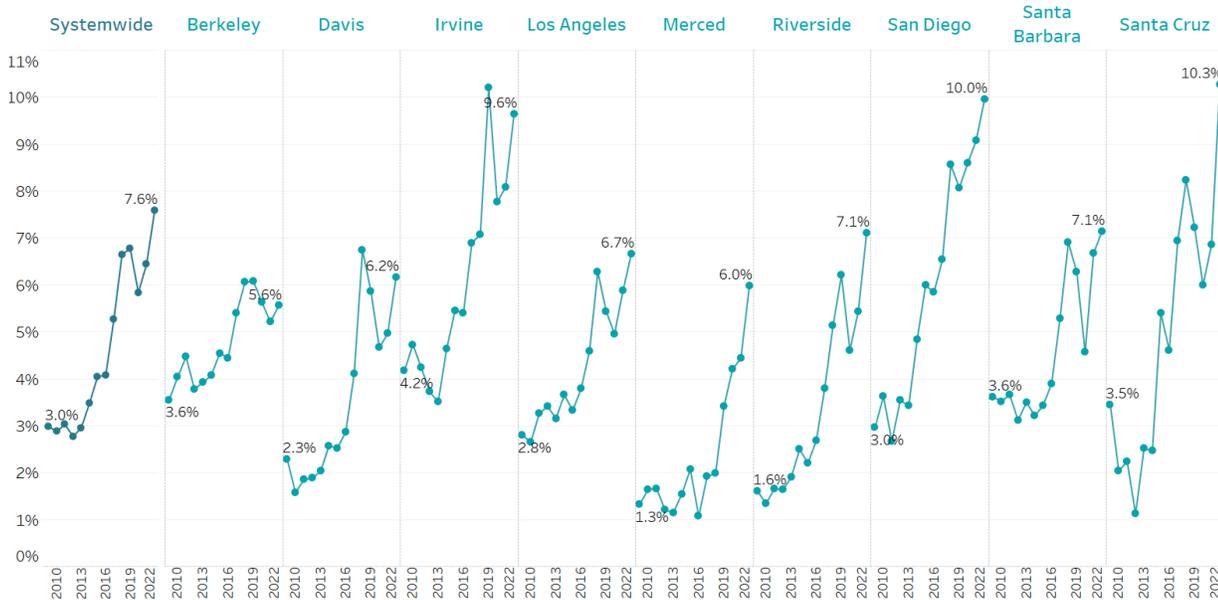


Notably, UC Santa Cruz saw an uptick in three-year graduation rates from 6.9 percent in 2021 to the UC-leading rate of 10.3 percent in 2022. Officials at UC Santa Cruz attribute the increase to several factors, including sustained promotion of [three-year pathways](#) since 2014—integrated across admissions, advising, and summer programs. The 2022 cohort was also the first to benefit from the Chancellor's "[Pay for Only 10](#)" program (launched summer 2023), which encouraged summer enrollment alongside the [Summer Edge](#) program for entering students. Students are also entering with increased units completed. For Fall 2022, there was an increase in entering freshmen with 60 or more units, from 4 percent to 5.5 percent, which would help position them for an accelerated path to graduation. Finally, campuswide work to update and improve the campus degree audit system helps students see which requirements they have completed and which they still need to complete.

⁹ UC Merced's lower three-year graduation rate may reflect its unique campus context, including its newer status (established in 2005) and differing requirements under the Budget Framework Agreement. While other undergraduate UC campuses were required to develop three-year degree pathways for 10 of their top 15 majors, UC Merced was only required to develop such pathways for three of its top five majors.

¹⁰ UCSD publishes "[Three-Year Finish Plans](#)" approximately 500 college-major combinations, providing quarter-by-quarter course outlines across all UCSD colleges. These plans cover a wide range of majors, including those in Anthropology, Biological Sciences, Cognitive Science, Communication, Economics, Ethnic Studies, Global Health, Human Developmental Sciences, Political Science, Sociology, Urban Studies and Planning, and Visual Arts. Last updated for the 2024–25 academic year, these resources are complemented by personalized advising, as departmental and college advisors meet individually with students to develop custom three-year plans upon request.

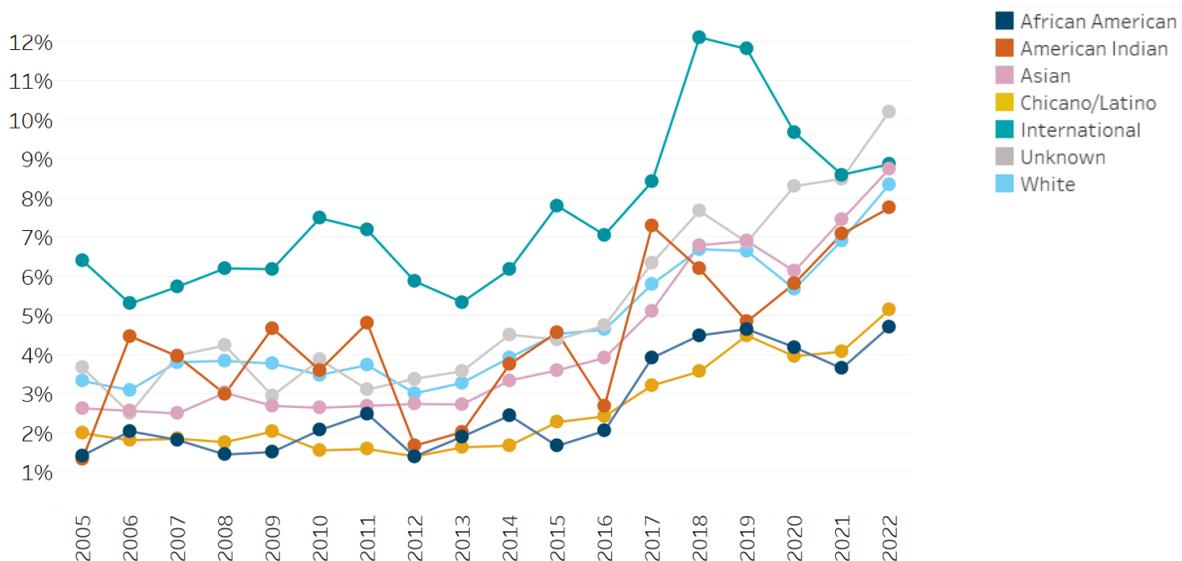
Figure 2. Three-year graduation rates by entering cohort and campus, 2009–2022



Three-Year Graduation Rates by Entering Cohort and Race/Ethnicity

Figure 3 shows systemwide three-year graduation rates by entering cohort (2005–2022) and race/ethnicity. Rates increase over time across all groups, with noticeable growth for cohorts entering after 2016. For the 2022 entering cohort, graduation rates are highest for students with unknown race/ethnicity at 10 percent, followed by international students and Asian students at 9 percent each. Rates were lowest for Chicano/Latino and African American students, at approximately 5 percent.

Figure 3. Three-year graduation rates by entering cohort and race/ethnicity



Three-Year Graduation Rates by *First-Generation* and *Pell Grant* Status

As shown in Figures 4 and 5, three-year graduation rates vary by student background: first-generation students and Pell Grant recipients are less likely to graduate within three years. For the 2022 entering cohort, the rate was 5.8 percent for first-generation students compared to 8.5 percent for non-first-generation students (a 2.7 percentage-point gap). Similarly, the rate was 5.5 percent for Pell Grant recipients and 8.9 percent for non-recipients (a 3.4 percentage-point gap). These differences may reflect disparities in access to key acceleration mechanisms (especially pre-UC units and the ability to enroll year-round) that are examined in subsequent sections.

Figure 4. Three-year graduation rates by first-generation status (2022 cohort)



Figure 5. Three-year graduation rates by Pell Grant status (2022 cohort)



Three-Year Graduation Rates by Discipline

Three-year graduation rates vary by field of study (Figure 6). Students majoring in social sciences, health professions, or professional fields are more likely to graduate within three years than those in engineering, computer science, physical sciences, math, life sciences, or those with an interdisciplinary or undeclared major.

Separately, the distribution of majors among three-year graduates is concentrated in a relatively narrow set of majors. These majors include Psychology, Economics/Business, Political Science, and Computer Science (despite lower within-major three-year rates), and account for a large share of three-year graduates (see **Appendix C, Figure C1**). Many of these majors align with those for which campuses developed three-year pathways under the 2016 Budget Framework Agreement, though the alignment varies by campus, and major definitions have shifted over time.

Figure 6. Three-year graduation rates by discipline (2022 cohort)

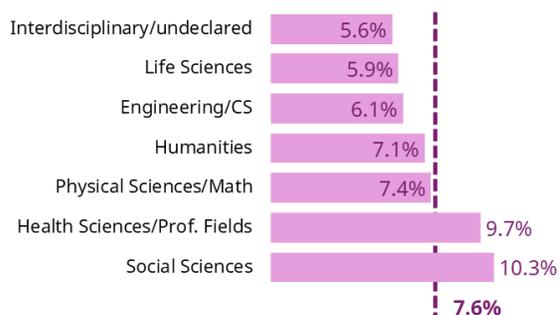
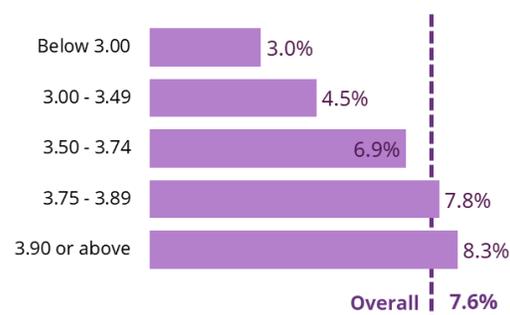


Figure 7. Three-year graduation rates by high school GPA (2022 cohort)



Three-Year Graduation Rates by Pre-College GPA

Pre-college GPA is strongly associated with the likelihood of graduating within three years (Figure 7). Students with higher high school GPAs are more likely to complete their degrees early. For the

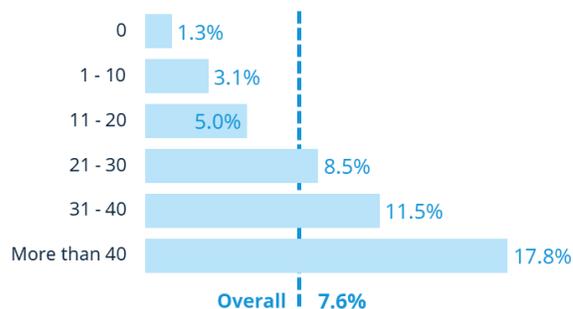
2022 cohort, over eight percent of students with a high school GPA of 3.9 or above graduated from UC within three years, compared with fewer than five percent of those with a GPA below 3.5.

Three-Year Graduation Rates and Early Accumulation of College Credits

Similarly, early accumulation of college credits is strongly associated with three-year graduation rates (Figure 8). Many freshmen enter UC with pre-UC units from AP/IB exam credit or dual-enrollment coursework. These appear to be among the strongest correlates of early graduation and lie largely outside UC’s direct control, since they depend heavily on high school course availability and students’ pre-college opportunities.

More than 17 percent of students with more than 40 pre-UC units earned a bachelor’s degree within three years. In contrast, fewer than two percent of students with no pre-UC units and fewer than four percent of those with 10 or fewer units did so. Even among those with 31–40 pre-UC units, the three-year graduation rate was only 11.5 percent, highlighting the importance of substantial pre-college credit accumulation.

Figure 8. Three-year graduation rates by pre-UC units (2022 cohort)



Three-Year Graduation Rates and Summer Session Units

Secondary factors, including higher courseloads and summer session enrollment, are also associated with early graduation.

Figure 9 shows that three-year graduation rates increase as summer session unit accumulation increases. For the 2022 cohort, the three-year graduation rate was 5.9 percent for students with 0 summer units, 6.3 percent for those with 1–3 units, 7.2 percent for those with 4–6 units, and 10.3 percent for those with 7–9 units. Students with 10 or more summer units had the highest three-year graduation rate at 19.4 percent, compared with the systemwide average of 7.6 percent. This pattern underscores the role of year-round enrollment in successful three-year completion, while also reflecting differences in students’ financial capacity, time availability, and access to advising that shape which students can take summer units.

Figure 9. Three-year graduation rates by summer session units (2022 cohort)

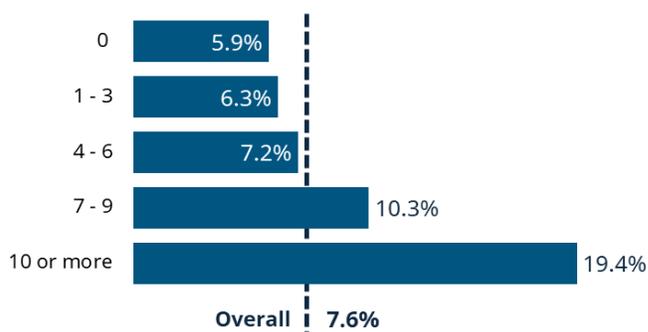
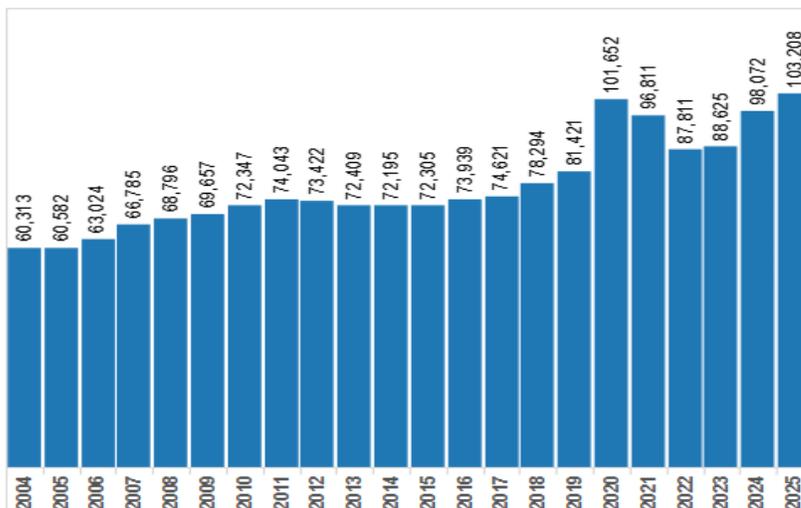


Figure 10 shows a gradual increase in summer session enrollments by headcount across UC from 2004 to 2025. The sharp increases in 2020 and 2021 were largely due to the expanded availability of online summer courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made these courses more accessible to students. Beyond the pandemic, there has also been a steady rise in regularly

scheduled online summer offerings. In terms of overall course delivery, 27.1 percent of summer courses were offered online in 2023, followed by 28.8 percent in 2024 and 33.1 percent in 2025.

While summer enrollment has been increasing, differences remain in who enrolls in summer session and how summer participation intersects with pre-UC credit. In general, first-generation students accumulate slightly more summer session units on average (2.9 vs. 2.4 units for the 2022 cohort) but enter UC with significantly fewer pre-UC units (17.2 vs. 25.2). A similar pattern holds for Pell Grant recipients compared with non-recipients (see **Appendix D, Figures D1 and D2**). This trend has persisted over the past two decades, with the pre-UC unit gap widening over time.

Figure 10. Summer undergraduate enrollment by academic year



Predicted three-year graduation rates remain low for students entering with relatively few pre-UC units and increase only modestly until students reach the 20-unit mark (see **Appendix D, Figure D3**). Beyond that point, the rate rises steadily, with the largest increases among students entering with very high levels of pre-UC credit (e.g., 40+ units). Students who are neither first-generation nor Pell recipients are more likely to enter above this threshold. For example, in the 2022 cohort, nearly 58 percent of continuing-generation students entered with more than 20 pre-UC units, compared to only 35 percent of first-generation students. Similar disparities are observed between Pell Grant recipients and non-recipients.

Similar patterns are seen for students who come from high schools designated as LCFF+. ¹¹ Although their three-year graduation rate has increased by about one percentage point since data became available for the 2018 entering cohort, it remains consistently below the systemwide average. For the 2022 cohort, students from LCFF+ high schools had a 3.8 percent three-year graduation rate, compared to 7.6 percent systemwide. They also enter UC with fewer pre-UC units (15.6 versus 23.0 for students from non-LCFF+ high schools) mirroring trends observed among first-generation students and Pell Grant recipients.

¹¹ LCFF+ high schools are those in which more than 75 percent of the school's total enrollment (unduplicated) is composed of pupils who are identified as either English learners, eligible for free or reduced-price meals, or foster youth. These schools are eligible for supplemental funding under the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and thus are known as "LCFF plus" (LCFF+) schools.

Are Students Who Graduate in Three Years Academically Engaged?

Figure 11 shows the relationship between three-year graduation rates and several measures of learning engagement. Overall, students who graduated within three years reported stronger early academic direction and higher levels of academic engagement.

Students who graduated within three years reported a slightly better understanding of a field of study during their freshman year, which may have helped them select an appropriate major early on. Thirteen percent of students who reported having an excellent understanding of a field in the freshman year completed their degree within three years, compared with only 3 percent of those who reported a very poor understanding.

Figure 11. Three-year graduation rates by first-year academic orientation and engagement

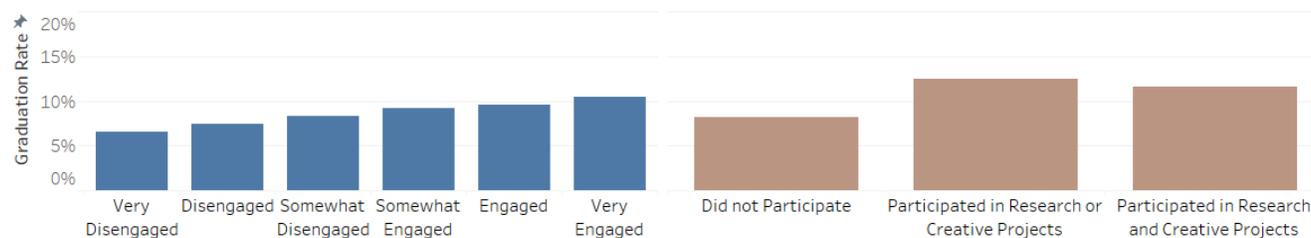
Understanding of a field of study in the freshman year

Hours spent attending classes, discussion sections, labs, and other academic activities outside of class in a typical week



Engagement in classroom activities, e.g., contributing to a class discussion, making a class presentation, etc.

Assisting faculty in their research or creative projects



The amount of time students spent attending classes, participating in discussion sections, and engaging in other academic activities outside of class is also noticeably related to three-year graduation. Students who devoted 20 or more hours per week to these activities were more likely to graduate within three years than those who spent fewer than 10 hours.

Classroom engagement, such as contributing to discussions or making presentations, is another significant predictor of timely graduation. Approximately 10 percent of students who were very engaged completed their degree within three years, compared with 7 percent of those who were very disengaged.

Assisting faculty with research or creative projects appears to align with faster degree completion. About 12 percent of students who assisted faculty with at least one research or

creative project graduated within three years, compared with 8 percent of those who did not assist faculty in any projects.

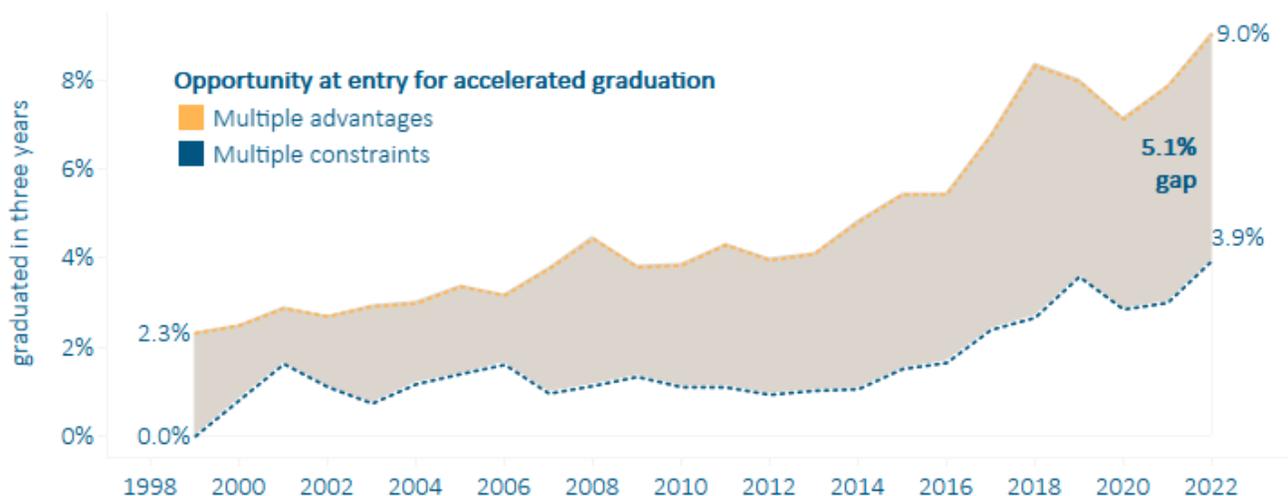
Taken together, these indicators suggest differences in academic direction at entry and early academic engagement between three-year graduates and other students, which may be related to three-year completion.

Who Truly Has Access to Three-Year Graduation?

Access to three-year graduation is not evenly distributed across students. Students entering UC with greater opportunity at entry—reflected in access to pre-UC credit, financial flexibility, and familiarity with college systems—are substantially more likely to graduate in three years than students entering with more limited opportunity.

While three-year graduation rates have increased over time for all groups, the gap between the most advantaged and most constrained students has more than doubled. This reflects increasing stratification in K–12 outcomes and the continued effects of prior educational experience and of financial flexibility once students enter UC.¹²

Figure 12. Three-year graduation rates over time, by opportunity at entry for accelerated graduation¹³



As mentioned previously, the strongest predictors of early graduation lie largely outside UC’s direct control. Pre-UC credit accumulation—driven by access to AP, IB, and dual-enrollment coursework in high school—is the single most important factor enabling three-year completion.

¹² Opportunity at entry reflects *cumulative* access to academic preparation, financial resources, and navigational familiarity prior to UC enrollment. Students who are continuing-generation, non-Pell, and not underrepresented are more likely to have had access to advanced coursework in high school, greater familiarity with college requirements and planning, and the economic flexibility to manage heavier courseloads or summer enrollment. These conditions compound to increase the likelihood of accelerated progress, independent of individual effort or ability.

¹³ Definitions: Multiple advantages – continuing-generation, non-Pell, and not underrepresented (all 3), Multiple constraints – first-generation, Pell, and underrepresented (all 3).

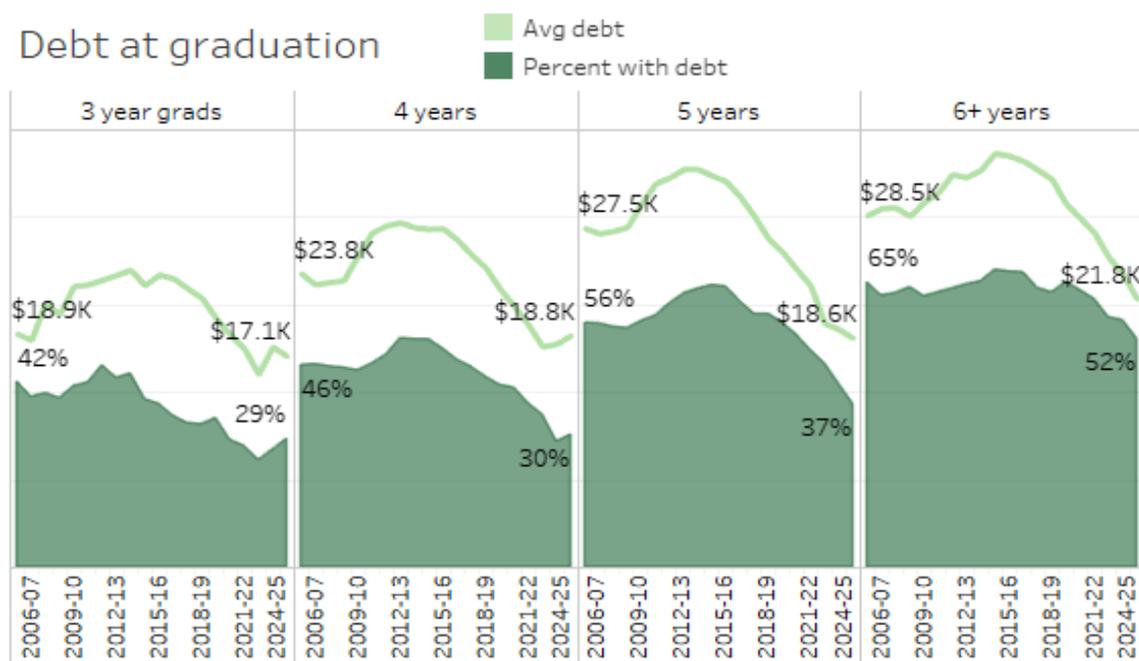
Secondary factors, also mentioned and explored above, including higher courseloads and summer session enrollment, are also key factors in early graduation. However, access to these options is itself shaped by the same structural conditions that influence pre-college preparation, including financial capacity, time availability, and advising support.

As a result, while UC can influence some marginal contributors to acceleration, three-year graduation cannot be scaled broadly without addressing upstream educational opportunities.

How do UC Students Who Graduate in Three Years Fare After Graduation?

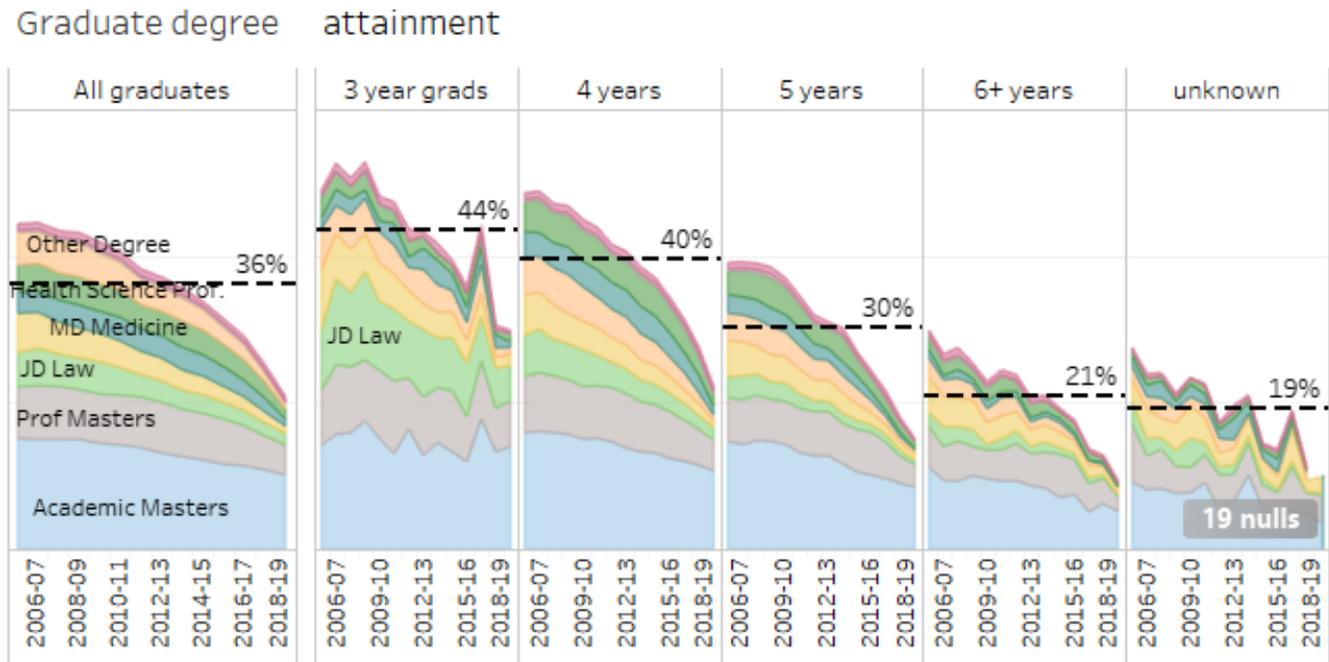
Students who graduate in three years borrow at similar rates to four-year graduates, but those who take out loans graduate with lower average debt—about \$1.7K less in 2024–25 (Figure 13). This difference should be interpreted cautiously, as three-year graduates tend to differ from their four-year peers in terms of pre-college preparation and access to acceleration mechanisms.

Figure 13. Debt at graduation for three-, four-, five- and six-year graduate cohorts



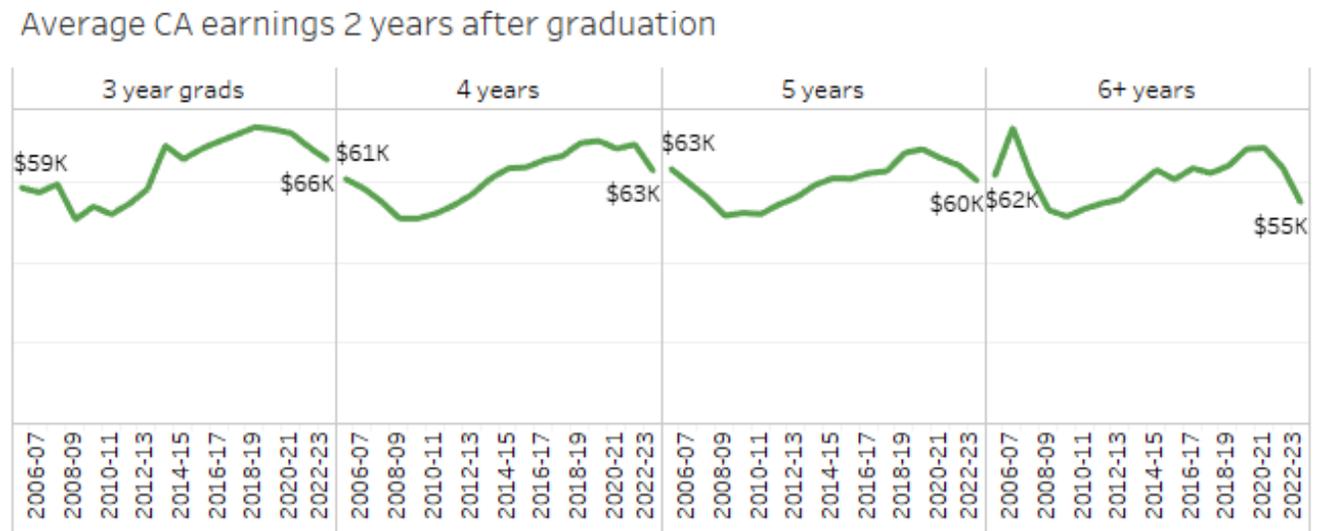
As shown in Figure 14, three-year graduates are also more likely to enroll in or complete graduate education during the follow-up period, with law and master’s degrees being the most common. However, these patterns may reflect selection factors such as major choice, academic preparation, and pre-UC credit accumulation.

Figure 14. Graduate degree attainment by time to degree (three-, four-, five-, and six-year)



Three-year graduates also have higher average post-college earnings than their four-, five-, and six-year graduate counterparts (see Figure 15). In 2022–23, among graduates with matched California wage records, three-year graduates earned about \$3K more than four-year graduates and about \$6K more than five-year graduates two years after graduation. This pattern has shifted over time. In 2006–07, three-year graduates earned about \$2K less than four-year graduates two years after graduation.

Figure 15. Average California earnings two years after graduation



The industries in which three-year graduates begin their post-graduation careers in California are broadly similar to those of four-, five-, and six-year graduates. However, they are more likely to enter K–12 education and legal services, and less likely to enter manufacturing (Figure 16). These patterns persist five years after graduation (Figure 17). Because three-year graduates are disproportionately drawn from certain majors and post-graduation pathways (such as graduate and professional education) that commonly lead to these sectors, the observed industry differences likely reflect differences in major and career trajectory composition, not time-to-degree alone.

Figure 16. California industries of employment two years after graduation

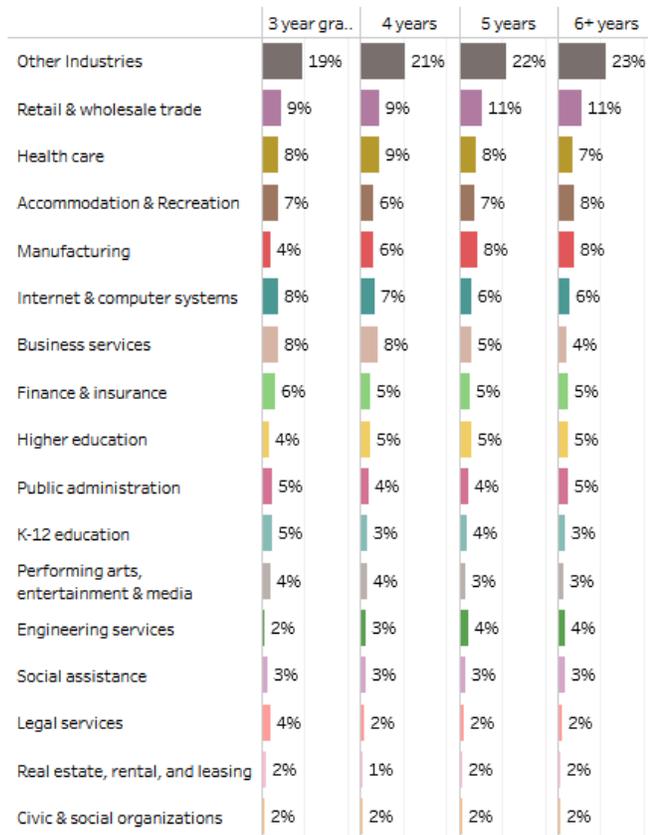
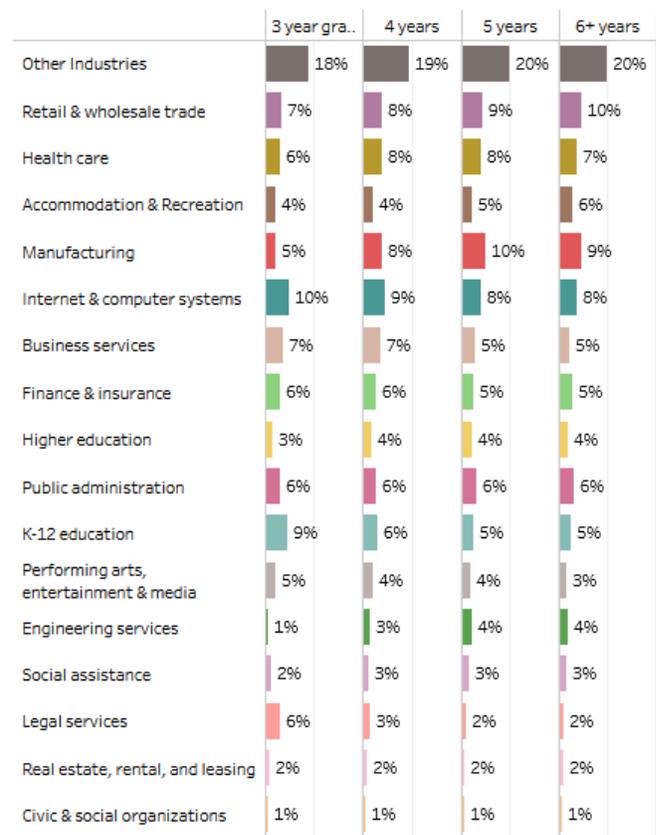


Figure 17. California industries of employment five years after graduation



Appendix A

Figure A1. Three-year degree pathways for top 15 undergraduate majors by degree award for entering freshmen (2011-12 through 2013-14)

GOAL MET: Each UC undergraduate campus developed three-year degree pathways for 10 out of its top 15 majors (3 out of its top 5 for Merced) by March 1, 2016
KEY: Green indicates Three-Year Degree Pathway developed; Shading indicates major not selected for Three-Year Degree Pathway; Blue column indicates total number of degrees awarded to students entering as freshmen, 2011-12 through 2013-14

Rank	Berkeley ¹	Davis ¹	Irvine ¹	Los Angeles ¹	Merced	Riverside ¹	San Diego ¹	Santa Barbara	Santa Cruz ¹
1	INTEGRATIVE BIOLOGY 1,105	PSYCHOLOGY 1,452	BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES 1,750	POLITICAL SCIENCE 970	BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES 409	BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION 1,118	PSYCHOLOGY 1,015	SOCIOLOGY 1,062	PSYCHOLOGY 1,080
2	ECONOMICS 986	ECONOMICS 696	BUSINESS ECONOMICS 876	PSYCHOLOGY 752	PSYCHOLOGY 394	BIOLOGY 931	BIOLOGY 741	PSYCHOLOGY 951	BUSINESS MANAGEMENT - ECONOMICS 715
3	ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING - COMPUTER SCI 815	BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES 640	POLITICAL SCIENCE 691	PSYCHOBIOLOGY 668	MANAGEMENT 255	PSYCHOLOGY 848	HUMAN BIOLOGY 731	GLOBAL STUDIES 752	MOLECULAR, CELL & DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY 473
4	POLITICAL SCIENCE 784	NEUROBIOLOGY, PHYSIOLOGY, & BEHAVIOR 616	PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL BEHAVIOR 676	ECONOMICS 612	POLITICAL SCIENCE 137	SOCIOLOGY 587	BIOCHEMISTRY & CELL BIOLOGY 556	POLITICAL SCIENCE 652	LITERATURE 438
5	BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION 733	COMMUNICATION 562	PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCES 571	BIOLOGY 608	MECHANICAL ENGINEERING 118	POLITICAL SCIENCE 341	ECONOMICS 548	ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES 587	ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES 413
6	PSYCHOLOGY 671	HUMAN DEVELOPMENT 531	SOCIOLOGY 497	SOCIOLOGY 572	COMPUTER SCIENCE & ENGINEERING 86	MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES 302	MANAGEMENT SCIENCE 516	COMMUNICATION STUDIES 581	SOCIOLOGY 398
7	POLITICAL ECONOMY 514	MANAGERIAL ECONOMICS 488	CRIMINOLOGY, LAW & SOCIETY 492	PHYSIOLOGICAL SCIENCE 570	ECONOMICS 84	HISTORY 291	COGNITIVE SCIENCE 440	BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES 474	HISTORY 361
8	ENGLISH 454	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS 488	PSYCHOLOGY 478	HISTORY 527	SOCIOLOGY 81	ENGLISH 269	COMPUTER SCIENCE 420	ENGLISH 402	ART 331
9	SOCIOLOGY 426	POLITICAL SCIENCE 437	INTERNATIONAL STUDIES 424	ENGLISH 468	COGNITIVE SCIENCE 74	ANTHROPOLOGY 261	COMMUNICATION ARTS 407	ECONOMICS & ACCOUNTING 333	POLITICS 330
10	PUBLIC HEALTH 395	BIOCHEMISTRY-MOLECULAR BIO 424	BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION 401	BUSINESS ECONOMICS 371	HISTORY 58	BIOCHEMISTRY 225	POLITICAL SCIENCE 316	BIOPSYCHOLOGY 310	ANTHROPOLOGY 316
11	COMPUTER SCIENCE 388	SOCIOLOGY 386	ECONOMICS 361	ANTHROPOLOGY 343	BIOENGINEERING 57	ECONOMICS/ADMIN STUDIES 220	PHYSIOLOGY & NEUROSCIENCE 299	FILM STUDIES 300	FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA 269
12	MEDIA STUDIES 377	ENGLISH 375	PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY 344	ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING 339	LITERATURES AND CULTURES 55	MECHANICAL ENGINEERING 202	MECHANICAL ENGINEERING 269	BUSINESS ECONOMICS 299	BIOLOGY 224
13	HISTORY 372	MECHANICAL ENGINEERING 361	ENGINEERING-MECHANICAL 310	COMMUNICATION STUDIES 335	APPLIED MATHEMATICS 49	BUSINESS ECONOMICS 199	HUMAN DEVELOPMENT 268	HISTORY 280	HEALTH SCIENCES 195
14	MECHANICAL ENGINEERING 367	CIVIL ENGINEERING 326	ENGLISH 288	NEUROSCIENCE 331	CHEMICAL SCIENCES 34	LIBERAL STUDIES 198	PHARMACOLOGICAL CHEMISTRY 231	COMPUTER SCIENCE 252	LEGAL STUDIES 194
15	ENVIRONMENTAL ECON & POLICY 310	ANIMAL SCIENCES 318	ENGINEERING-CIVIL 245	BIOCHEMISTRY 285	ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING 34	NEUROSCIENCE 192	STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING 226	ANTHROPOLOGY 248	ECONOMICS 189

¹ Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, and Santa Cruz created three-year degree pathways for more than the 10 majors required by the Budget Framework Agreement.

Appendix B

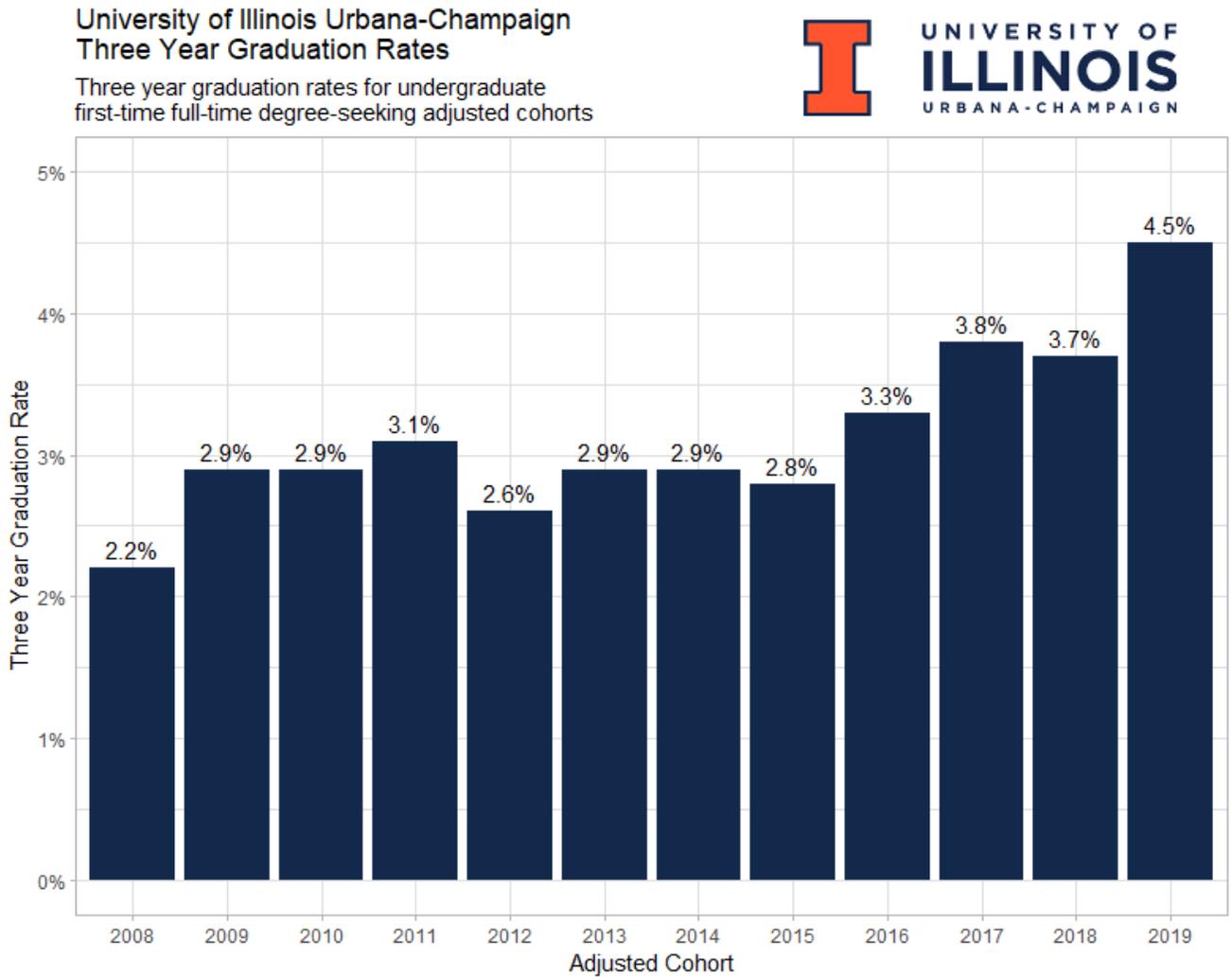
Table B1. Examples of Three-Year Undergraduate Degree Structures (outside of California). Institutions are categorized based on whether they offer (1) a formally designated three-year bachelor's degree, (2) institutionally supported accelerated completion within existing degree structures, or (3) no three-year degree option. Accelerated pathways rely on advanced standing credits, heavier course loads, summer or intersession enrollment, or combined-degree pipelines rather than redesigned three-year programs.

Institution	Degree Structure	Notes / Examples
Arizona State University	Accelerated bachelor's pathways — Accelerated completion pathway	Three-year completion possible through heavier course loads and summer enrollment
Butler University	Formal accelerated three-year degree tracks — Formal three-year degree	Over 40 majors, including Accounting, Computer Science, Economics, English, Political Science, Sociology, and Spanish
Harvard University	No formal three-year bachelor's degree program — No three-year degree	Harvard College requires a fixed number of courses typically completed across eight semesters
Manchester University	Approved reduced-credit three-year programs (limited) — No three-year degree	Currently focused on Pre-Athletic Training and Pre-Physical Therapy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	No formal three-year bachelor's degree program — No three-year degree	Undergraduate education explicitly framed as a four-year program
Miami University (Oxford)	Formal Three-Year Pathways — Formal three-year degree	Majors include Public Health, Software Engineering, Spanish, Sociology, Quantitative Economics, and others
Northern Arizona University	Reduced-credit three-year bachelor's degrees — No three-year degree	Approximately 90-credit degrees in areas such as Hospitality and Engineering Technology
Ohio University	Advising-supported three-year completion pathways — No three-year degree	Relies on transfer, AP, IB, or CLEP credits; not a reduced-credit degree
Public universities (Florida)	No formal three-year degree programs identified — No three-year degree	Accelerated completion possible; standard four-year credit structures remain
Public universities (Illinois)	No formal three-year degree programs identified — No three-year degree	Three-year graduation possible via acceleration but not formally designated
Stanford University	No formal three-year bachelor's degree program — No three-year degree	Degree requirements organized around a four-year residential model; early graduation only in exceptional cases
University at Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo)	Accelerated combined-degree pathways only — Accelerated completion pathway	No general three-year bachelor's degree; supports structured programs such as a 3+3 bachelor's-to-JD pathway
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	No formal three-year bachelor's degree program — No three-year degree	Standard four-year, credit-based structure; emphasis on accelerated combined bachelor's/master's pathways

Institution	Degree Structure	Notes / Examples
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor	No formal three-year bachelor’s degree program — No three-year degree	Traditional four-year framework; three-year references function as advising tools, not designated degrees
University of Virginia	Accelerated completion pathways within existing degrees — Accelerated completion pathway	College of Arts & Sciences supports three-year completion via advanced standing, intensive loads, and summer/January-term enrollment
Yale University	No formal three-year bachelor’s degree program — No three-year degree	Degree structure based on term/unit totals consistent with a four-year model
Yavapai College	Reduced-credit three-year bachelor’s degree — No three-year degree	92-credit Bachelor of Applied Science in Business

Figure B1. Three-year graduation rates at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2008-2019.

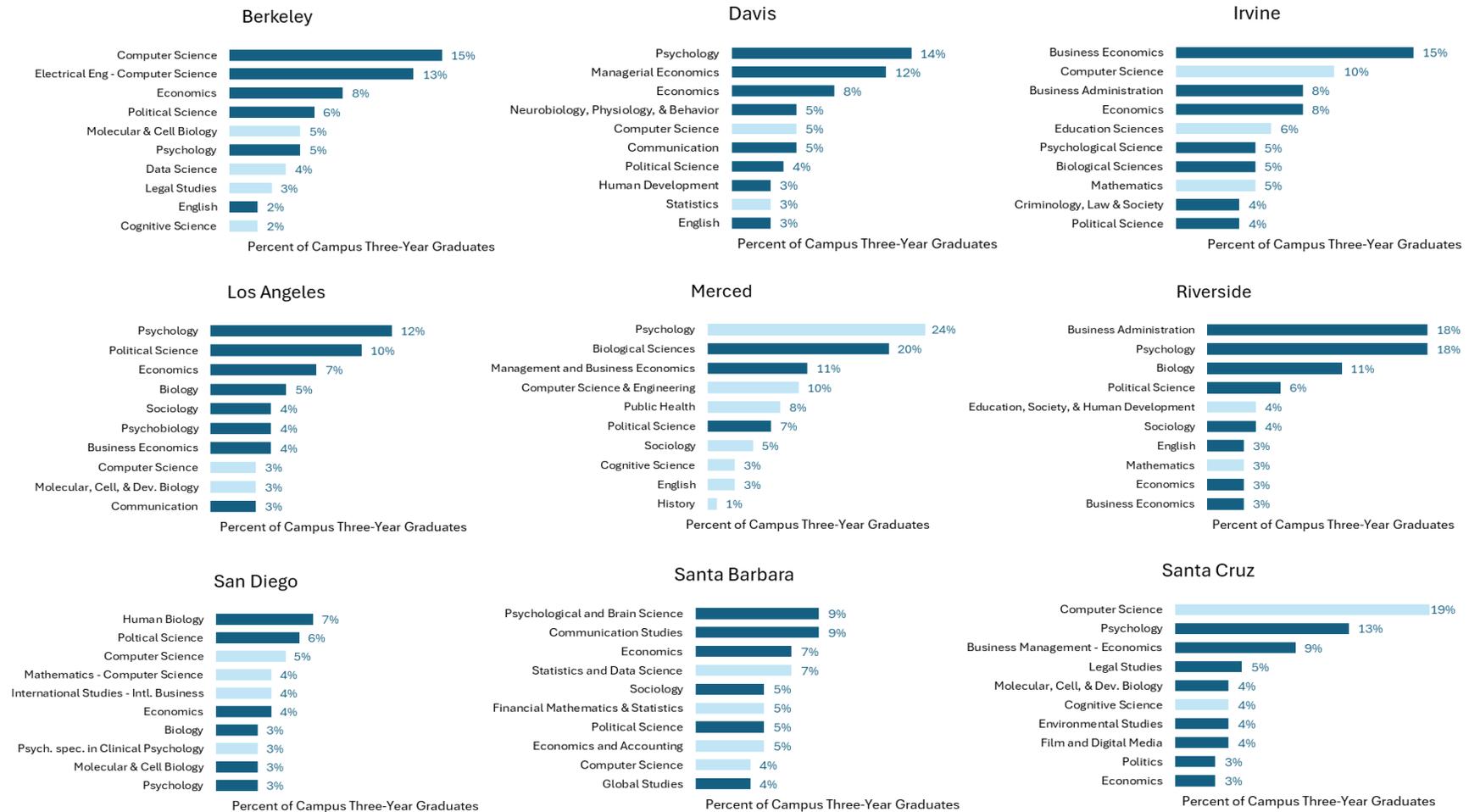
Note: The University of Illinois System Office calculates the adjusted cohorts as well as their three-, four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates all at the same time, six years after entry. That is why cohorts 2020, 2021, and 2022 do not yet appear in this visualization.



Data source: University of Illinois System graduation data

Appendix C

Figure C1. Top majors of three-year degree graduates by campus, 2019-20 to 2023-24. Each UC campus developed three-year degree pathways for 10 out of its top 15 majors (3 out of its top 5 for UC Merced) by March 1, 2016, as part of the Budget Framework Agreement. These majors (or the current closest applicable major) are identified by the **dark blue bars** in the figure below.



Appendix D

Figure D1 shows trends in average summer session units and pre-UC units for first-generation and continuing-generation UC students from 2005 through 2023 entering cohorts. First-generation students consistently accumulated slightly more summer units than continuing-generation students. However, they entered UC with significantly fewer pre-UC units on average, with the gap widening over time. In 2023, first-generation students entered with an average of 16.6 pre-UC units, compared to 25.1 for continuing-generation students – a gap of 8.5 units.

Figure D1. Average Summer and Pre-UC Units for First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students, UC Entering Cohorts 2005–2023.

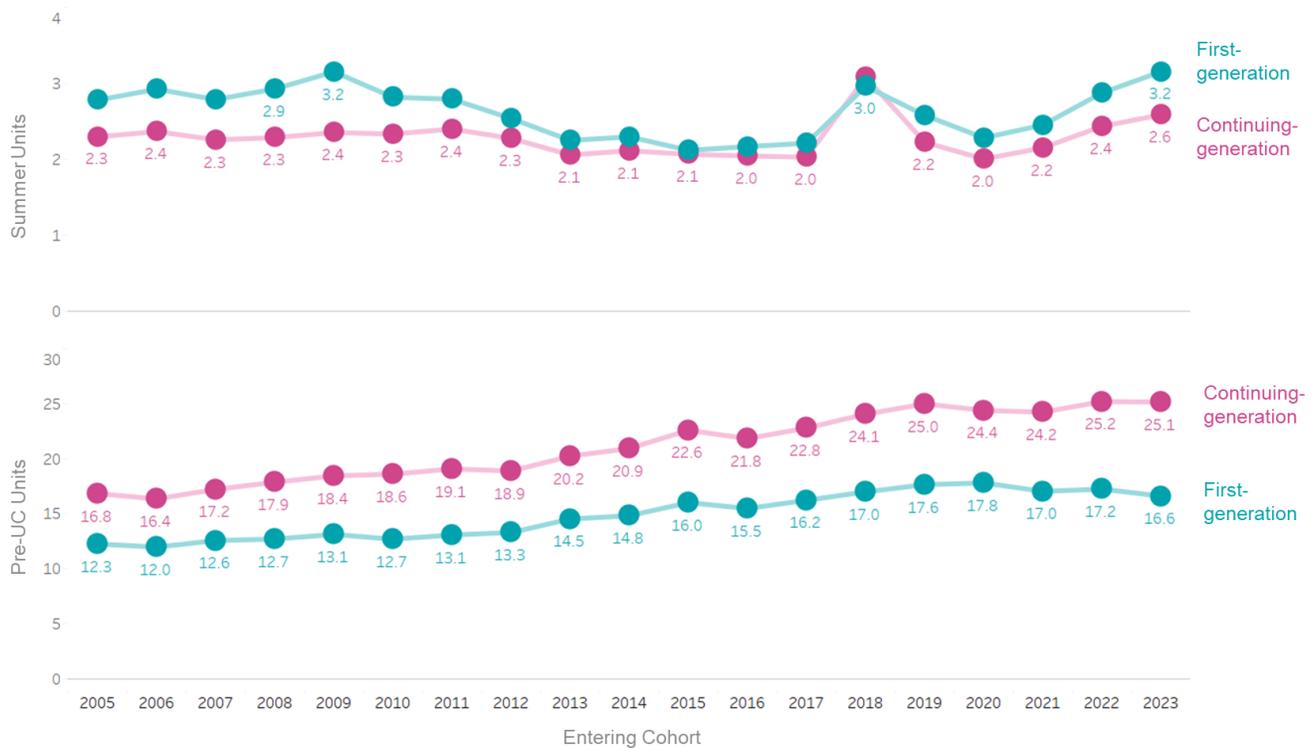


Figure D2 displays trends in average summer session units and pre-UC units for Pell Grant recipients and non-recipients across UC entering cohorts from 2005 to 2023. Pell Grant recipients consistently take more summer session units than non-recipients, with the largest recent gap in 2023 (3.3 units vs. 2.5 units). However, they enter UC with significantly fewer pre-UC units. In 2023, Pell Grant students averaged 17.6 pre-UC units, compared to 24.7 for non-Pell Grant students – a gap of 7.1 units. These trends mirror disparities observed for first-generation students.

Figure D2. Average Summer and Pre-UC Units for Pell Grant and Non-Pell Grant Students, UC Entering Cohorts 2005–2023.

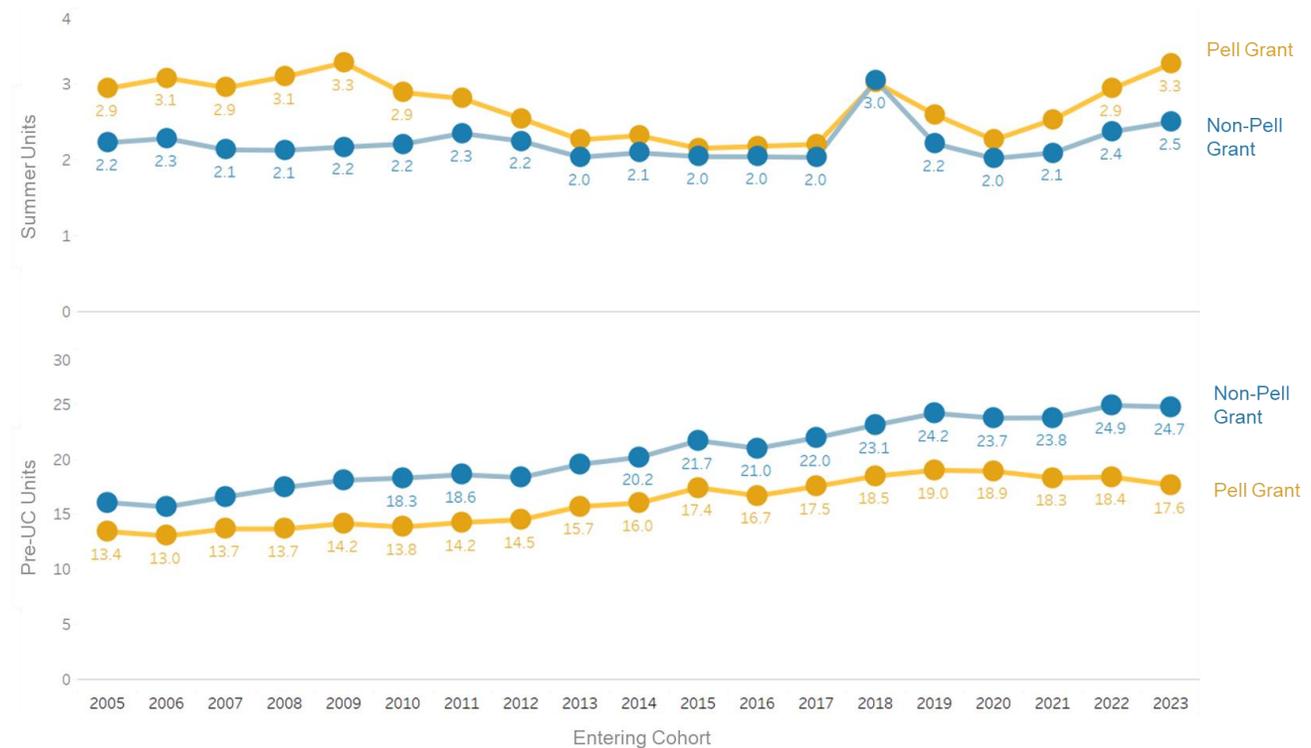


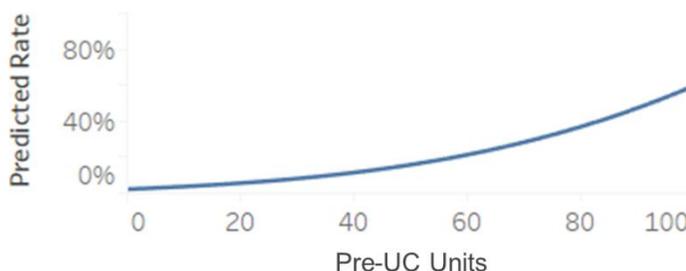
Figure D3 shows the predicted probability of graduating within three years as a function of pre-UC units and summer session units. In both cases, the relationships are positive but nonlinear. For pre-UC units, the predicted three-year graduation rate remains low and relatively flat for students entering with fewer than 20 units. Beyond this threshold, the rate begins to rise steadily, with especially sharp increases after the 40-unit mark, which highlights the strong influence of extensive pre-college credit on early graduation.

The pattern for summer session units differs. Predicted graduation rates increase rapidly from 0 to about 5 summer units, with the rate of growth tapering off after approximately 10 units. Nonetheless, students completing more than 10 summer units still show noticeably higher predicted rates of graduating in three years, reaching around 20 percent. These trends vary depending on campus and student subgroup but follow a consistent overall pattern.

When considered alongside Figures D1 and D2, which show that first-generation and Pell Grant students consistently enter UC with fewer pre-UC units than their peers, despite accumulating slightly more summer session units on average, this model underscores how differences in access to pre-college acceleration opportunities can translate into persistent differences in three-year graduation outcomes. While summer enrollment offers some potential for catch-up, its predictive effect is more modest compared to that of pre-UC credit, emphasizing the impact of pre-UC access and opportunities.

Figure D3. Predicted Three-Year Graduation Rates by Pre-UC Units and Summer Session Units

Predicted three-year graduation rates by pre-UC units



Predicted three-year graduation rates by summer session units

