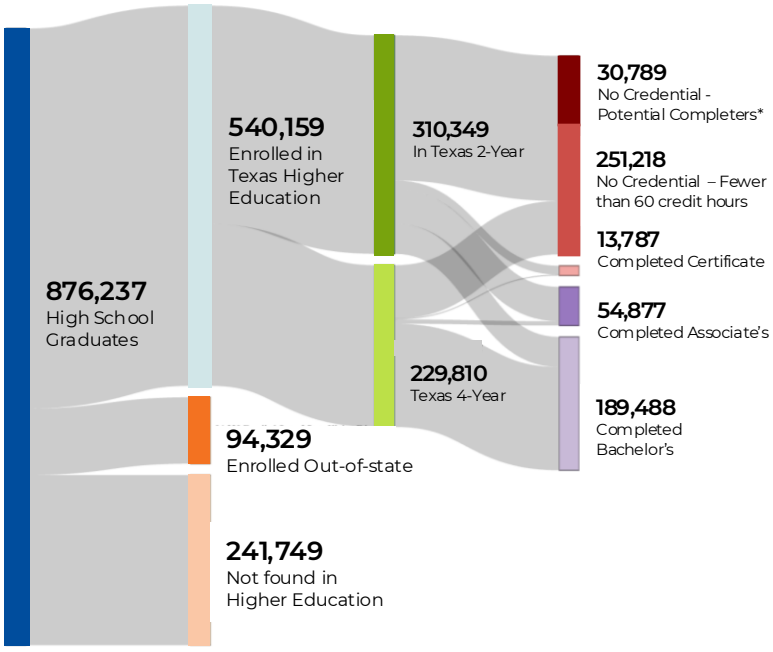
EARNED BUT NOT AWARDED

UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY FOR TEXAS' POTENTIAL COMPLETERS

Executive Summary

As the number of jobs requiring only a high school diploma continues to diminish, postsecondary degrees or credentials have become essential for securing stable, high-wage employment. Yet, while more than **90 percent of Texas high school students now graduate** from high school, **only one in three completes a postsecondary credential** within six years. This gap threatens both individual opportunity and the state's long-term competitiveness.

Flow of Texas Public High School Graduates into Higher Education



Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. This visual uses data from a combined cohort of Texas students who enrolled in 8th grade between 2011 and 2013 and graduated from a Texas public high school.

** Number of Potential Completers is an estimate assuming 5.7% of those who enrolled becoming potential completers based on what was observed in other cohorts.*

Key Takeaways

↗ Texas has an attainment gap

Over 90 percent of students graduate high school, but only one in three earns a college credential within six years.

↗ The workforce demands more

In 2031, 61 percent of Texas jobs will require some form of postsecondary training.[1]

↗ "Potential Completers" are a hidden opportunity

From 2012–2022, more than 54,000 Texans earned 60+ credit hours but left higher education without a credential.

↗ Progress without recognition

The skills and credits obtained by "Potential Completers" remain invisible in the labor market and state attainment goals.

↗ Policy can unlock value

Embedded credentials, reverse transfer, credit portability, and retroactive credentialing can turn unfinished progress into meaningful attainment.

Recognizing this, Texas leaders set a bold target through the Building a Talent Strong Texas Plan: by 2030, 60 percent of Texans ages 25 – 64 will hold a degree, certificate or credential of value.[2] **Achieving this goal will require more than enrollment growth**. It will demand rethinking how progress is measured and ensuring that **students who have already demonstrated persistence, skill and commitment are recognized for their achievements**.

[1] Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031 – State Report*.

[2] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Building a Talent Strong Texas.

Texas is making progress toward its higher education goals. In 2024, public institutions of higher education awarded 318,301 degrees and certificates — a record high and a 10,000-award increase from 2023.[3] But even with that momentum, Texas cannot build the workforce of tomorrow — or meet credential attainment goals — by focusing only on traditional student populations.

Who are Potential Completers?

Potential Completer is a term used to describe students who have earned at least 60 college credit hours, roughly the equivalent of an associate degree, but left college without earning a credential.

Between 2012 and 2022, **more than 54,000 Texans were Potential Completers,** including nearly 39,000 individuals who earned all their college credits at the four-year institution where they first enrolled.

While that total spans a decade, it represents thousands of students each year who came close to completion. If even a share of these students had been awarded credentials, Texas' annual totals could have been measurably higher, accelerating progress toward statewide goals and providing individuals with recognition for the skills they have already demonstrated.

Thousands of these students were in college for years, advanced in rigorous majors like engineering, architecture, and business, and maintained solid GPAs.

These students invested years of study and thousands of dollars into their education. Yet without a credential, that effort goes unrecognized. Texas can change this by building systems that formally acknowledge their progress, turning unfinished pathways into meaningful credentials that expand opportunity for individuals and strengthen the state's workforce.

Texas 2036 recommends five key strategies to fully recognize the progress of Potential Completers:

- **Establish retroactive credentialing** so four-year universities can award associate degrees to former students who have already met the requirements.
- **Expand embedded credentials** so students receive recognition earlier in their college careers.
- **Streamline reverse transfer** to ensure students who begin at community colleges receive associate degrees when eligible, even after transferring.
- **Improve credit portability** so courses transfer consistently across institutions, reducing wasted credits and lowering the risk of students leaving without a credential.
- **Advance competency-based education** to allow students to earn credit for demonstrated skills and knowledge, providing additional pathways to completion and recognizing learning that occurs both inside and outside the classroom.

By advancing these policies, Texas can unlock the potential of thousands of students who have already invested in their education and move closer to building a workforce ready for the challenges ahead.

[3] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. "Boosting Our Future With More Postsecondary Degrees and Certificates."

The State of Potential Completers

The Scale of the Opportunity

Potential Completers are students who have earned at least 60 college credit hours — the equivalent of an associate degree — but left school without a credential. They represent a distinct group within the broader "some college, no degree" population. Unlike students who may have taken only a handful of courses, such as dual credit in high school, **Potential Completers have reached a meaningful threshold of progress toward a credential.**

By focusing on this group, the analysis highlights Texans who are closest to completion and represent one of the most immediate opportunities for increasing attainment. This report examines two types of Potential Completers: those who earned all their credits at their original four-year university (single institution Potential Completers) and those who accumulated credits across a mix of two- and four-year institutions (mixed Potential Completers).

Who are Potential Completers?

This unique population has put in hard work toward a degree, but they have not received official recognition for their work.

Derrick

The Transfer Student

Derrick started at a community college and later transferred to a four-year university to study business. Many of his credits did not transfer cleanly, forcing him to retake courses. By the time he stopped attending to support his family, he had earned more than 120 credits — enough for a bachelor's degree — but no credential. With an embedded or retroactive associate degree, Derrick's years of progress could have been recognized and rewarded.

Jasmine

The Pell Grant Recipient

Jasmine enrolled at a four-year university with the help of Pell Grants, which covered much of her tuition. She worked part-time and steadily earned credits toward a biology degree. But after six years, she exhausted her Pell eligibility. Without financial aid, she could not afford tuition and left school with over 90 credits completed. Jasmine's progress reflects years of study and financial investment. Without a credential, her skills remain undervalued in the labor market.

Between 2012 and 2022, more than 54,000 students earned at least 60 credits without receiving a credential. Nearly 39,000 of those students did so entirely at the four-year institution where they first enrolled.

Potential Completers also follow a predictable timeline. Very few students become Potential Completers in the first couple of years, since earning 60 credits typically takes longer. Instead, the count of Potential Completers grows steadily across cohorts and begins to level off by about the fifth year after enrollment. **This pattern suggests that most students who become Potential Completers persist for several years before leaving, rather than disengaging early.**

Potential Completers are not students who disengage after a semester or two. They are students who persist for years, invest heavily in their education, and often come close to earning a degree before leaving school. **Their stories highlight both the value of their progress and the risk of leaving it unrecognized.**

Number of Texas Students with 60 or more credits from Public Higher Education Institutions, but not awarded a credential by Cohort Year	
2012	6,249
2013	6,164
2014	5,892
2015	6,079
2016	6,070
2017	6,196
2018	6,019
2019	5,523
2020	3,746
2021	1,726
2022	458

Earlier cohorts (2012–2018) show consistent levels of near-completers, while recent cohorts are still progressing toward the 60-credit threshold.

Types of Potential Completers

Potential Completers are students who have earned a substantial number of college credits but have not yet obtained a credential. While they are not a uniform group, several notable patterns emerge in their educational pathways. The following sections describe key characteristics and subgroups of potential completers, highlighting common trends in how these students move through higher education.

1. Potential Completers at One Institution

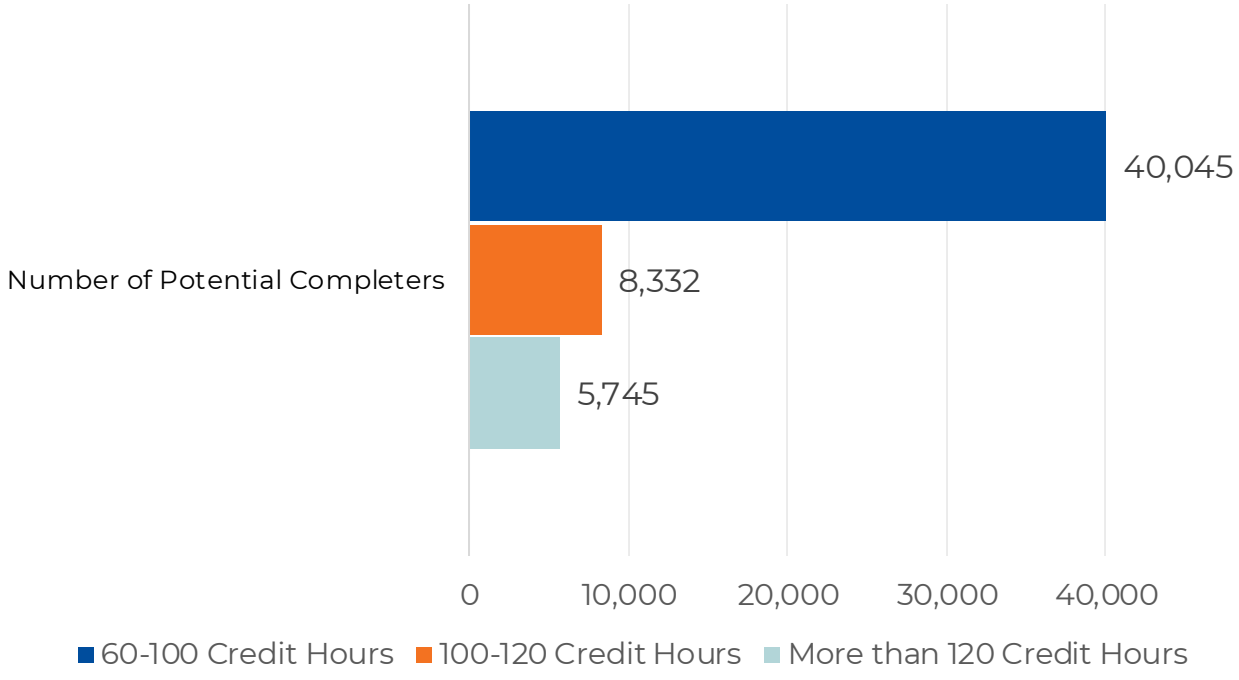
The majority of students who become Potential Completers earn all of their credits at the same four-year university where they first enrolled. These Potential Completers are more likely to accumulate higher numbers of credits directly in their chosen majors than Potential Completers who attended more than one institution. In fact, some advanced well beyond the 60-credit threshold, with **more than one in ten surpassing 120 credits** — enough to meet the requirements for most bachelor's degrees. **Their progress shows persistence and deep investment in a single institution, even if they ultimately left without a credential.**

2. Potential Completers Across Multiple Institutions (Mixed Potential Completers)

Other Potential Completers attend a mix of both two- and four-year institutions. These mixed Potential Completers often face additional barriers related to credit transfer and degree progression. Transfer students in Texas face significant barriers to timely credential completion. On average, they take 7.5 years to graduate, compared to 5.3 years for students who remain at a single institution.[4] This gap underscores that even transfer students who eventually earn a degree face additional hurdles, while many others discontinue their studies before reaching graduation. For mixed Potential Completers, credit loss during transfer may be a turning point that derails progress toward graduation.

In fact, 14.4 percent of transfer students earned 120 or more credits (2012–2019), compared with 10.7 percent of students who stayed at one university. Coursework that should count toward a degree may not be accepted by the receiving institution, leaving these students with fewer major-specific credits despite having accumulated significant overall total credit hours. Credit loss during transfer extends the time to degree completion, increases costs, and raises the risk that students leave before earning a credential.

How Many Credit Hours Did Potential Completers Earn?

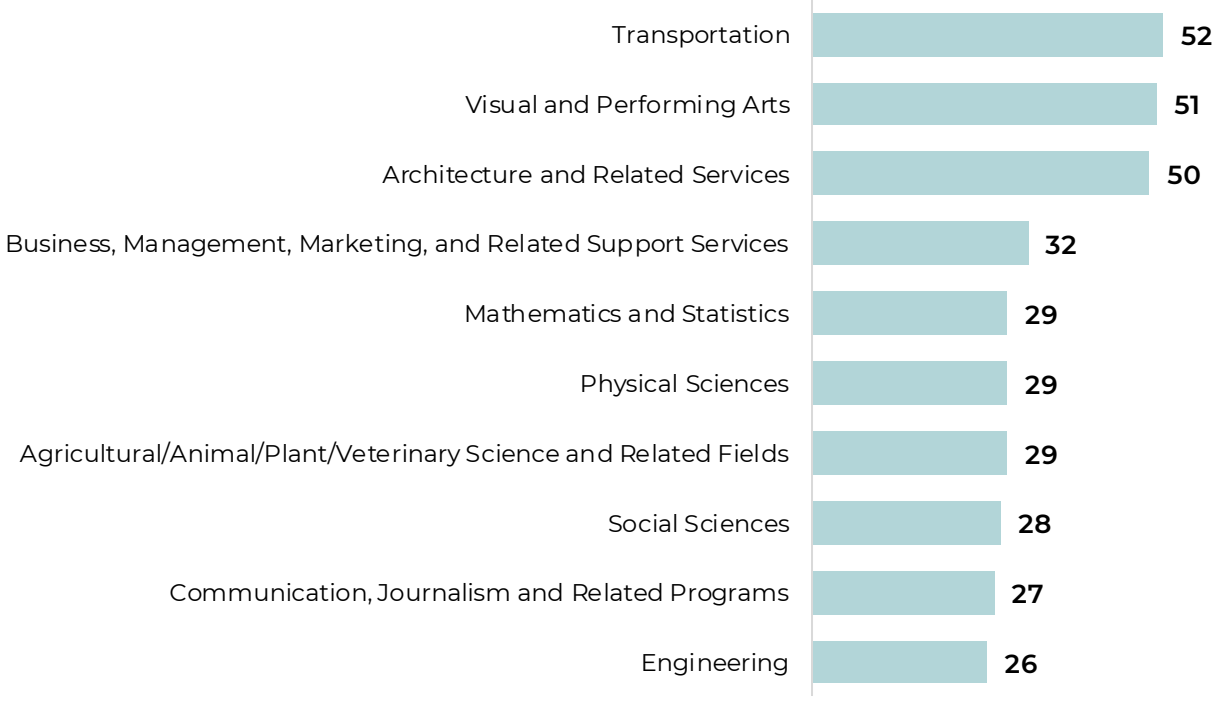


[4] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Transfer Report 2025. October 2025.

3. Potential Completers with Significant Progress in Their Majors

Many Potential Completers advanced deep into their programs. Students in architecture, transportation and materials moving, and visual and performing arts averaged more than 50 credits in their chosen field. Even those who never declared a major often built substantial coursework in demanding areas like engineering, business, and biological sciences. Many maintained strong GPAs, with average GPAs between 2.7 and 2.8 across cohorts, demonstrating the capacity to succeed at higher levels.

Top 10 Majors by Average In-Major Credit Hours Earned by Potential Completers



4. Potential Completers Facing Financial Barriers

Economic barriers compound these patterns. Potential Completers are five percentage points more likely to receive Pell Grants than their peers and, on average, receive $3,500 more in Pell funding. This signals higher levels of financial need, and, for many, financial pressures may play a role in the decision to leave without completing a credential.

Mixed Potential Completers rely on Pell Grants even more heavily than their single-institution peers. However, they receive an estimated $500–$800 less in total financial aid across all sources, including federal, state, and institutional aid. This suggests that transferring between institutions can disrupt aid eligibility and reduce the overall support students receive, increasing the financial burden of completing a degree.

5. Potential Completers by Demographics

Potential Completers are more likely to be Black, male, and low-income. About 7 percent of Black students become Potential Completers, compared to 5 percent of Hispanic students, 4.5 percent of Asian students, and 4 percent of white students. Men are also more likely than women to become Potential Completers (6.0 percent vs. 4.6 percent). Women enroll in higher education at higher rates than men, accounting for 57 percent of enrollment in 2024.[5] Although they constitute a larger share of Potential Completers overall, their individual likelihood of being a Potential Completer is lower.

The picture is clear: Potential Completers represent achievement that has gone unrecognized

Potential Completers are students who persisted, invested and proved themselves academically, yet left without a credential to show for it. Their unfinished journeys highlight not a lack of effort, but a missed opportunity for Texas to translate earned credits into degrees of value. Seizing this opportunity could strengthen the workforce and bring the state closer to its credential attainment goals.

Single Institution Potential Completers

Students who earned all of their college credits at the same four-year university where they first enrolled. Their academic path is continuous within one institution, often resulting in higher numbers of major-specific credits.

Mixed Potential Completers

Students who split their enrollment between a mix of two-year and four-year institutions. While these students accumulate significant credit totals, they often face challenges with credit transfer and degree alignment that can delay or derail completion.

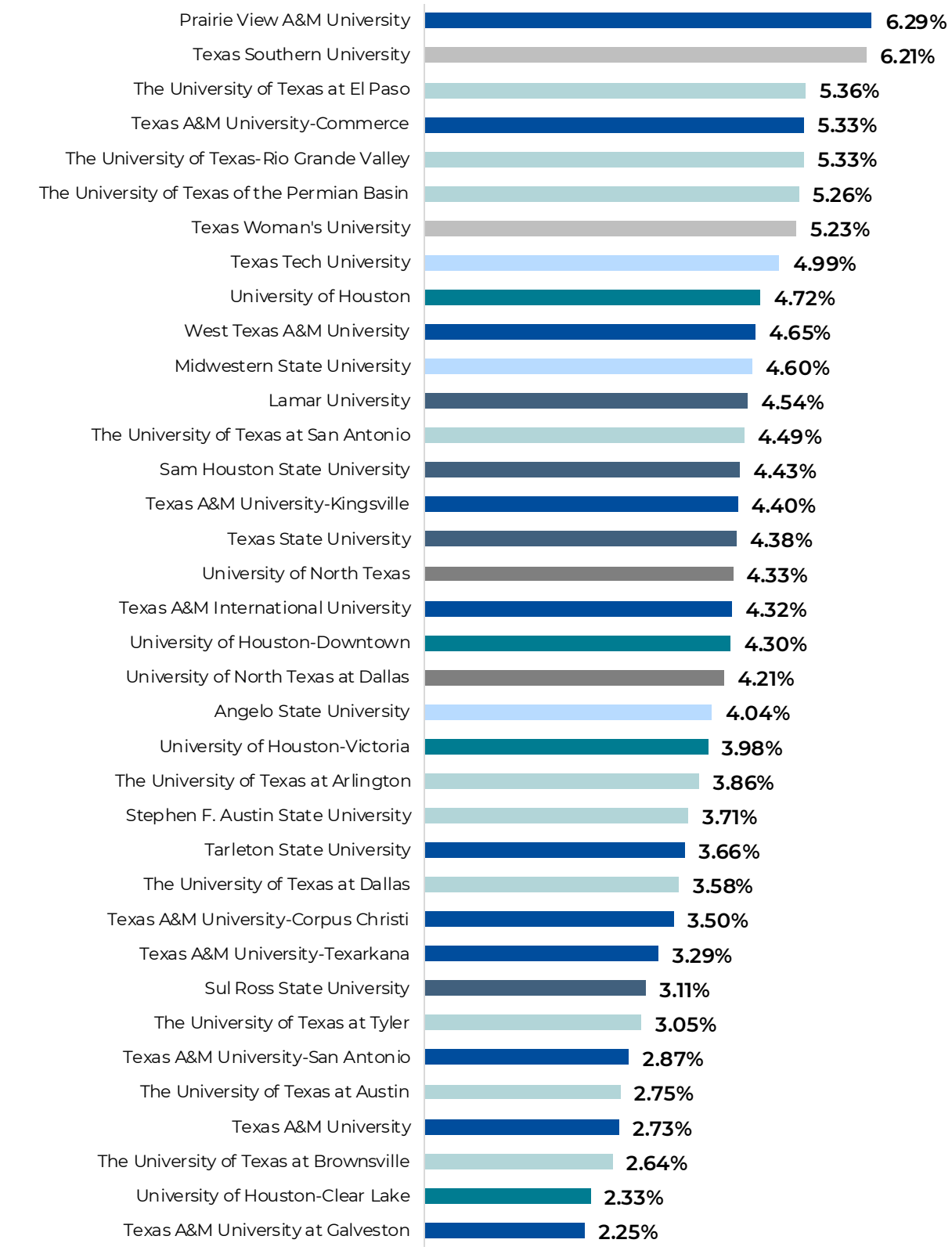
Where The Impact is Concentrated

Potential Completers are found at every type of institution in Texas, but their prevalence varies. On average, 5.7 percent of students who begin at public two- or four-year institutions become Potential Completers. In total, an estimated 1 in 10 students who enroll in public higher education institutions in Texas and earn 60 or more credit hours leave without a credential.

Some institutions stand out. Texas' two public historically Black universities have Potential Completer rates above 6 percent — higher than most institutions statewide — meaning a larger share students left with significant progress toward a credential but without finishing. However, those rates are still slightly below the statewide average for Black students (7 percent), showing that while these universities have more near-completers than many institutions overall, they are performing somewhat better than the statewide average when it comes to supporting Black students to completion.

[5] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Expanding Enrollment Across Communities and Institutions.

% of Potential Completers by Higher Education Institution

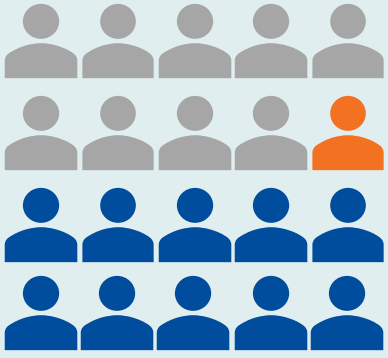


Sul Ross State University serves a majority-minority, high-need student body and awards the highest average Pell Grant aid in the state, about $21,000 compared to a statewide average of $12,000. However, its Potential Completer rate remains below average at 3.11 percent.

Texas' flagship universities, The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University, also have below-average Potential Completer rates. However, because of their large student bodies, they still account for more than 5,500 Potential Completers combined. Statewide, seven universities each have more than 2,400 Potential Completers, making them high-leverage campuses where targeted strategies could reach the largest number of students.

Because most Potential Completers earn all their credits at a single four-year university, solutions must begin at the institutional level. Strengthening degree audit systems, expanding retroactive credentialing, and improving internal advising can ensure students' progress is recognized before they leave. While mixed-institution students reveal the need for stronger statewide transfer coordination, the greatest impact will come from university-level reforms that directly reach the majority of Potential Completers.

On average, 5.7 percent of students who begin at public two- or four-year institutions become Potential Completers.



No Credential – fewer than 60 credit hours

Potential Completers

Certificate, Associate or Bachelor's received

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. This visual uses data from a combined cohort of Texas students who enrolled in 8th grade between 2011 and 2013 and graduated from a Texas public high school.

From Data to Impact

Potential Completers represent a critical, yet overlooked, opportunity for Texas. By better recognizing their progress and creating clearer pathways to meaningful credentials, the state has an immediate opportunity to reduce opportunity gaps, strengthen the workforce, and move closer to its credential attainment goals. The next section examines what happens after students leave college, exploring both the labor market outcomes of Potential Completers and why their unfinished progress matters for both individuals and the state.

What Happens After They Leave College?

The workforce outcomes of Potential Completers provide essential context for the broader conversation about credential attainment and workforce readiness. This group represents students who have demonstrated persistence, skill and meaningful progress toward a degree, yet their experiences reveal both the value and the limits of partial completion. While substantial college progress carries clear labor market value, its returns are often more limited without the formal recognition of a credential.

Earnings and Employment Trends

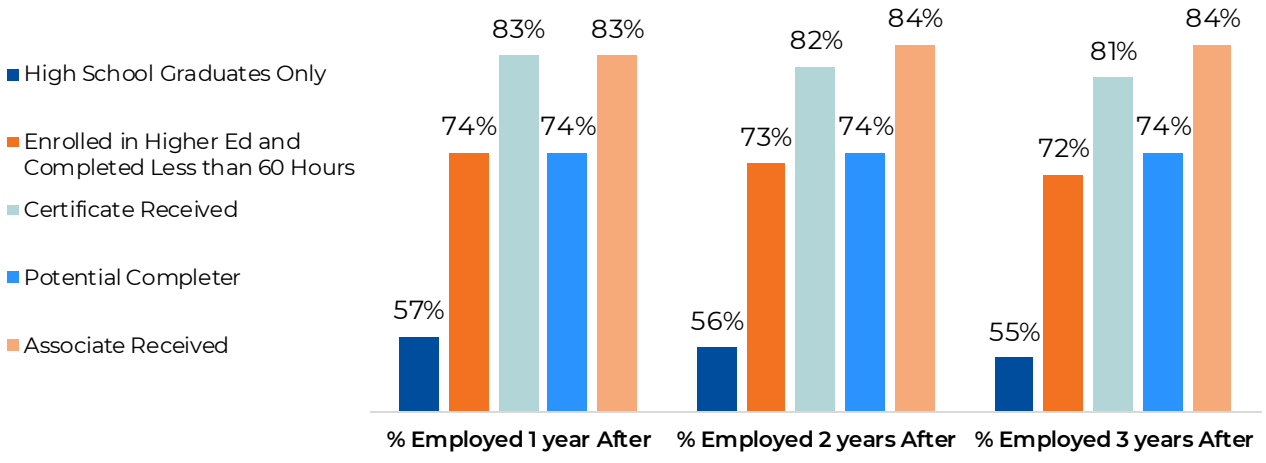
At a macro level, when comparing the wages of all potential completers to associate degree holders, potential completers perform on par with their associate degree-earning peers. Potential Completers' median annual earnings rise from about $30,000 in the first year after leaving school to nearly $46,000 by the third, closely mirroring associate degree holders, whose wages grow from $26,000 to $42,500 over the same period.[6]

However, this early parity tells only part of the story. Over time, associate degree holders begin to see greater returns on their education. Their wages grow by 63 percent over three years, compared to 55 percent for Potential Completers. This faster growth suggests that completing a credential provides not only an initial wage advantage but also sustained momentum for advancement into higher-paying roles.

Employment patterns show a similar gap. Within three years of leaving college, 74 percent of Potential Completers are employed, compared to 83 percent of associate degree earners. This difference indicates that Potential Completers participate in the workforce at slightly lower rates than their credentialed peers.

While these aggregate patterns are informative, the economic returns for partial completion vary sharply across fields of study and demographic characteristics.

Employment Rates by Educational Achievement



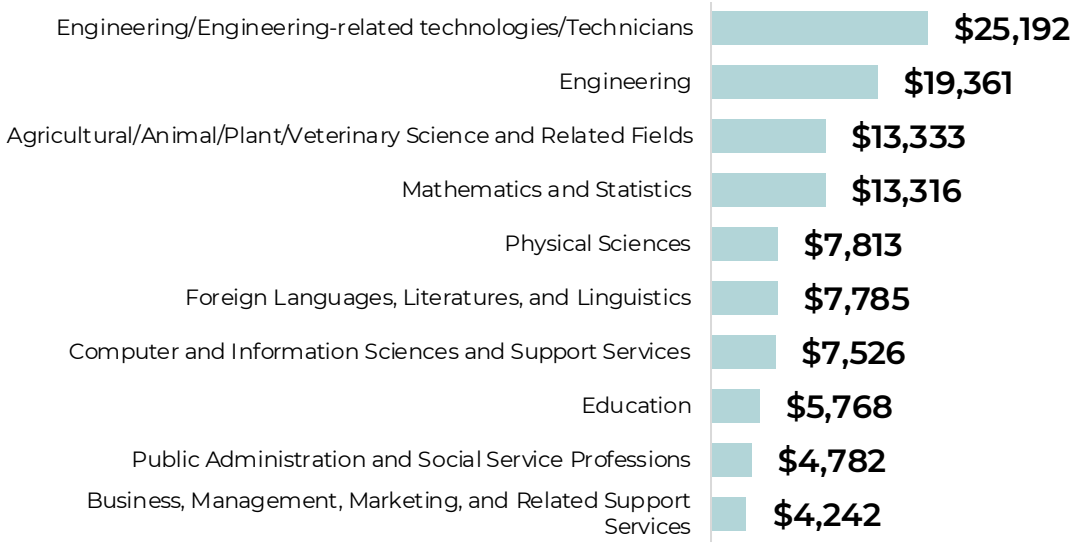
[6] This analysis focuses on outcomes that can be tracked within Texas, using data from the state's public higher education institutions and workforce records. It does not capture students who transferred to private or out-of-state colleges or those employed beyond Texas borders. The findings should therefore be understood as reflecting in-state outcomes only.

Differences Across Fields of Study

The relationship between educational progress and labor market outcomes depends heavily on a student's field of study. In some majors, particularly those tied to technical or applied skills, the absence of a credential carries significant economic consequences.

The wage and employment advantages associated with earning a credential are especially pronounced in technical fields. **In disciplines such as engineering technologies, Potential Completers earn about $25,000 less per year than students who complete an associate degree. Their employment rates are also 23 percentage points lower.** Similarly, Potential Completers with mathematics majors earn approximately $13,000 less than associate degree earners in the same field.

Wage Advantage of Associate Degree Holders vs. Potential Completers by Major



These patterns reflect how the absence of a formal credential limits access to occupations that rely on documented technical proficiency. In these fields, a credential signals both mastery and readiness to employers. Its absence can restrict entry or advancement, even for students with substantial coursework and skills.

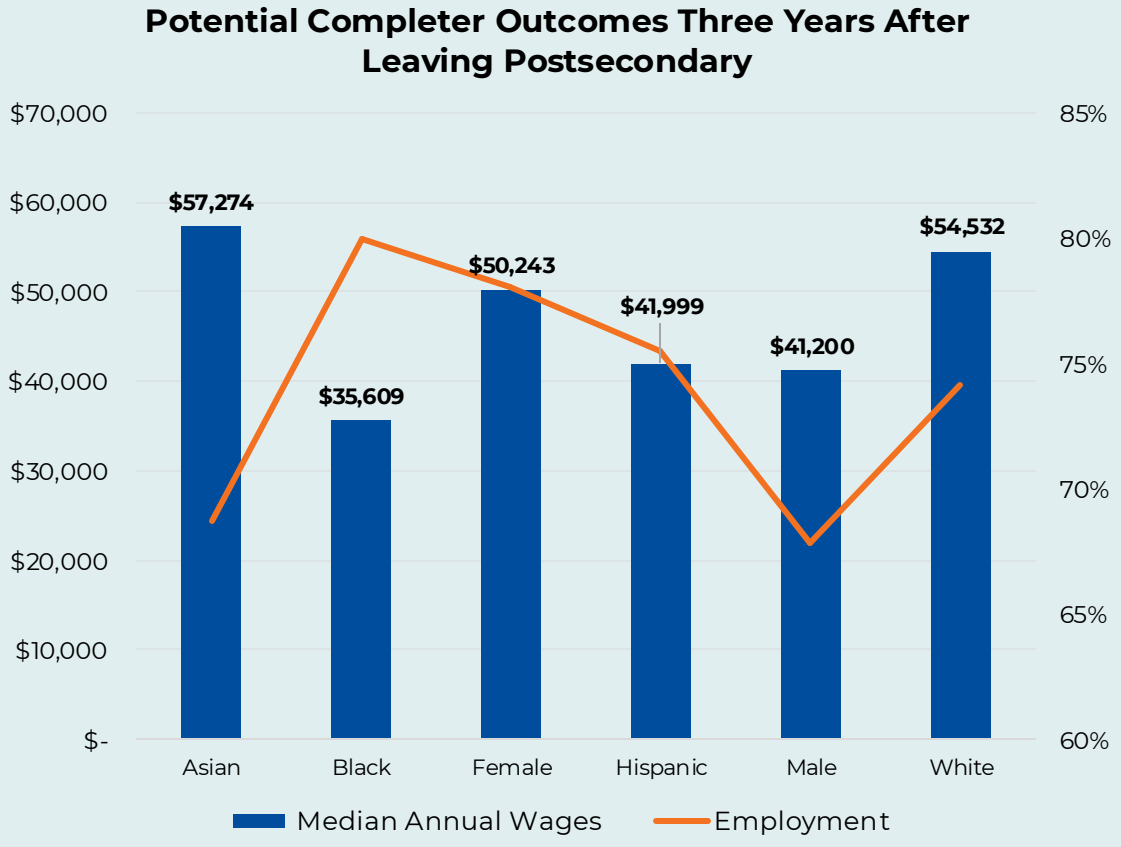
While the largest wage gaps appear in technical and applied disciplines, several fields show relatively small differences between Potential Completers and associate degree earners. In majors such as visual and performing arts, social sciences, and biological and biomedical sciences, wage differentials are less than $5,000 annually, indicating limited economic separation between the two groups. In these areas, employment outcomes appear less dependent on credential completion, reflecting labor markets where work experience and skill application carry comparable weight to formal attainment.

This variation across fields underscores that the value of completion is not uniform; rather, it depends on the degree to which employers in a given sector rely on credentials as signals of readiness or qualification.

Male Potential Completers Face Steeper Penalties

The labor market outcomes of Potential Completers are not uniform, and the disparities are most striking along gender lines. Female Potential Completers have significantly higher median wages ($50,243 vs. $41,200) and employment rates (78 percent vs. 68 percent) than their male counterparts. These patterns suggest that while leaving college without a credential carries consequences for both groups, women appear to experience a less severe impact, whereas men face greater setbacks in both workforce participation and earnings.

The penalty for noncompletion is especially steep for men when compared to their credentialed peers. **Potential Completer men have the lowest employment rates across all demographic groups and show the largest employment gap between Potential Completers and associate degree holders (68 percent vs. 83 percent).** This pattern makes clear that men lose the most ground when they stop short of a degree, both in terms of earnings and workforce participation.



Variation in Outcomes

The outcomes of Potential Completers reveal that the impact of leaving college without a credential is far from uniform. Earnings and employment differences by gender and field of study show that while some students maintain stability in the workforce, others experience significant setbacks — particularly in technical fields and among men. These variations highlight that the value of college progress depends not only on how much students learn, but whether their work is formally recognized.

Solving for Potential Completers

Many Texans have made significant progress toward a degree but left school without a credential. Recognizing these Potential Completers through targeted initiatives would honor their achievement, strengthen the workforce, and accelerate progress toward Texas' credential attainment goals.

Establish Retroactive Credentialing

Retroactive credentialing (sometimes called "back-awarded" associate degrees) allows four-year universities to confer an associate degree to students who do not complete a bachelor's program after earning substantial credits. Unlike reverse transfer, which serves students who begin at a two-year institution, retroactive credentialing ensures that progress made entirely at a four-year university does not go unrecognized.

Colorado's **Re-Engaged (CORE) initiative** shows the promise of this approach.[7] In that program, four-year universities can award associate degrees to students who earned at least 70 credit hours before leaving school. A similar effort in Texas would allow universities to formally recognize progress for thousands of former students whose academic work currently remains invisible.

Recommendation

Establish a statewide retroactive credentialing policy that authorizes and strongly encourages four-year universities to automatically award associate degrees once students meet eligibility requirements. Doing so would reduce the number of Potential Completers, boost workforce recognition, and accelerate progress toward state attainment goals.

Expand Embedded Credentials

Embedded credentials, including associate degrees and shorter-term certificates earned within bachelor's pathways, offer students formal recognition of progress before completing a four-year degree. These milestones can be awarded at 60 credits or even earlier, reflecting skills that are valuable in the labor market.

For Potential Completers, embedded credentials provide:

- Recognition for substantial coursework completed, even without a four-year degree.
- Stackable pathways that make returning to finish a degree more achievable.
- Greater equity, since low-income and transfer students are disproportionately at risk of leaving without any credentials.

[7] Colorado Department of Higher Education. Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) Initiative.

West Texas A&M University has already demonstrated the impact of this approach. In its first year, nearly 1,000 students automatically received embedded associate degrees once they met academic requirements, giving them a credential of value even as they pursued a bachelor's degree.[8] This model shows how embedded credentials can both reduce student debt and create clearer pathways to completion.

Recommendation

Expand the use of embedded credentials across public universities and ensure they are automatically awarded once requirements are met. By capturing progress earlier, the state can reduce the risk of students leaving empty-handed and strengthen pathways toward bachelor's degree completion.

Improve Credit Portability

While most Potential Completers earn all their credits at a single university, many are transfer students whose pathways span multiple institutions. For these students, progress toward a credential depends on how well institutions coordinate advising, degree planning, and credit applicability. Texas has made important strides to improve the transfer process through initiatives like the Texas Direct Transfer Degree. This program awards an associate degree to students who complete the Texas Core Curriculum and a Field of Study Curriculum, a set of lower-division courses defined in state law that must transfer and apply toward a specific major at any public university. This framework is designed to help students transfer with a 60-credit block and enter their university major with standing as a junior.

Still, credit loss remains a major barrier. In FY 2024, more than 80,000 transfer credits were denied, often because courses did not meet degree requirements.[9] These issues increase the risk of students leaving school before completing, especially for mixed Potential Completers whose pathways are longer and more complex.

Recommendation

Expand adoption of the Field of Study Curriculum to more majors, strengthen advising so students understand how courses apply toward their intended bachelor's degree, and hold institutions accountable for applying transfer credits as guaranteed under state policy. Reducing credit loss through clearer pathways and consistent transfer practices would lower costs, decrease stop-out risks, and help more Potential Completers turn their progress into credentials of value.

[8] West Texas A&M University. "WT's Embedded Associate Degree Program Has Successful First Year."

[9] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Major Policy Discussion. April 2025.

Streamline Reverse Transfer

Texas already has a reverse transfer framework that allows students who start at a community college and later transfer to a four-year university to receive an associate degree once they have earned the required credits. However, the process is often slowed by inconsistent institutional policies, unclear communication, and limited data sharing between colleges and universities. Robust and automated degree audits are essential to simplifying this process, helping institutions quickly identify when students have met associate degree requirements and ensuring those credentials are awarded without delay.

For Potential Completers, especially those who exit a four-year university after transferring from a two-year institution, streamlining reverse transfer would ensure their progress is formally recognized. Awarding associate degrees through a clear, consistent and automatic process would reduce lost credit, improve employment outcomes, and provide momentum for students to continue toward a bachelor's degree.

Recommendation

Strengthen and simplify reverse transfer by standardizing policies statewide, ensuring automatic degree audits, and improving transcript and data sharing between two- and four-year institutions. A more efficient system would allow thousands of Texans to convert earned credits into meaningful credentials and strengthening the workforce.

Advance Competency-Based Education

The absence of a formal credential often limits access to occupations that require documented technical proficiency. In these fields, a credential signals mastery and readiness to employers, while its absence can restrict advancement, even for students with substantial coursework and skills. Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers a flexible framework to address this challenge by allowing students to earn credentials through demonstrated mastery of specific skills and knowledge rather than accumulated credit hours.

CBE is especially valuable for Potential Completers, who have made significant academic progress and gained workforce experience but lack formal recognition of their skills. Building on House Bill 4848 (2025), which requires each public university system in Texas to offer affordable, competency-based bachelor's degree programs in high-demand fields, Texas can extend this model to the associate and sub-baccalaureate levels to create accelerated pathways that align with technical workforce needs.

Recommendation

Continue advancing work on competency-based education to strengthen programs that recognize prior learning and demonstrated skills. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in collaboration with community colleges and universities, should expand CBE in high-demand technical fields, ensuring programs award credit for demonstrated mastery, remain affordable, and align with workforce needs. Texas should also explore opportunities to extend competency-based education to sub-baccalaureate pathways to help more students turn existing progress into recognized credentials.

Conclusion

Potential Completers are a deeply deserving population whose persistence and investment in higher education have yet to be fully recognized. More than 54,000 students had earned 60 or more credit hours — often enough for an associate degree or more — yet left without a credential between 2012 and 2022. Their progress reflects persistence and ability, but without recognition, it remains invisible in the labor market and in state attainment goals.

By expanding embedded credentials, establishing retroactive credentialing, streamlining reverse transfer, and strengthening credit portability, Texas can ensure these students receive credit for the work they have already done. Because most Potential Completers come from four-year universities, efforts to address this challenge should begin there, ensuring students who have already demonstrated success receive the recognition they deserve. At the same time, improving coordination and transfer systems at two-year colleges would further support this population and strengthen pathways across the higher education system. Doing so would strengthen the workforce and accelerate progress toward statewide credential attainment goals.

Awarding associate degrees to Potential Completers is an important first step — but it should not be the last. A broader vision must also consider how shorter-term credentials, including those earned with fewer than 60 credits, can provide meaningful recognition of progress. Building out this framework would create a more comprehensive system of stackable credentials, ensuring that every step students take in higher education moves them closer to opportunity and that no progress goes unrecognized.

This report was prepared by the Texas 2036 Education and Workforce Team

Grace Atkins
Policy Advisor, Postsecondary and Workforce

Grace works as the Policy Advisor for Workforce and Postsecondary Education at Texas 2036. She covers policy areas related to workforce development and advanced learning opportunities beyond high school, with a particular emphasis on aligning educational outcomes with the state's workforce needs.

Carlo Castillo
Data Analyst

Carlo serves as a Data Analyst at Texas 2036, where he advances data-driven strategies to improve education and workforce outcomes. A Rio Grande Valley native, he previously helped reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy in Washington, D.C., through roles in education policy and data analysis.

Appendix

Data Sources and Collaborators

In collaboration with the Texas Schools Project at the University of Texas at Dallas through the Texas Education Research Center (ERC), Texas 2036 conducted an analysis of postsecondary students across Texas public institutions. This study identifies and profiles "Potential Completers" — students who accumulated significant college credit but exited without earning a credential of value.

The landscape scope spans First-Time-In-College (FTIC) cohorts entering Texas public four-year universities between 2012 and 2022, utilizing comprehensive data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

The primary data sources include:

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Student Report Series

- CBM001 / CBM0C1 / CBM0CS: Identifies First-Time-In-College (FTIC) enrollment and verifies subsequent enrollment status across observation years.
- CBM00S: Tracks cumulative semester credit hours earned per student and by subject area (CIP code).
- CBM009: Identifies postsecondary credentials awarded (degree or certificate) and their timing.
- CBM00B: Provides institutional selectivity indicators.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA): Public high school graduation data used to link cohorts and determine entry into higher education.
- Texas Workforce Commission (TWC): Quarterly wage and employment data used to measure post-school outcomes, including employment rates and median annual earnings.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS): Consumer Price Index data used to adjust wages for inflation over time.

Study Population and Analytical Framework

The study focused on First-Time-In-College (FTIC) students at Texas public four-year universities from cohort years 2012–2022. The core population identified as Potential Completers (PCs) includes students who:

- Earned 60 or more cumulative college credit hours (equivalent to an associate degree);
- Did not earn any credential (degree or certificate) by the final observation year (2024); and
- Were not enrolled in any higher education institution during that observation year.

Two comparison groups were also analyzed:

1. Four-Year University Accumulators – Students with ≥60 credits earned at any public four-year university.
2. Mixed Enrollment Pathway Accumulators – Students with ≥60 credits earned across a mix of two-year and four-year institutions.

These categories allowed for disaggregation of outcomes by enrollment pattern, institution type, race/ethnicity, gender, and financial aid profile.

Methodological Notes

- Credit Accumulation Analysis: Credit totals and distributions (60–100, 100–120, and 120+ credit hour categories) were calculated using CBM00S data.
- Academic and Financial Indicators: Financial aid and loan data were derived from THECB's Financial Aid Database (FAD), capturing Pell Grants, SEOG, TPEG, TEACH, CAL loans, and work-study support.
- Employment and Wage Outcomes: Employment and median wage outcomes were derived from TWC Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records and measured at one, two, and three years post-observation.

Key Limitations

While this study draws upon comprehensive state administrative data, several limitations constrain interpretation:

1. Data Scope and Exclusions: The study is limited to Texas public higher education institutions and excludes private or out-of-state enrollment and completion activity.
2. Observation Window: Cohorts were followed through 2024, meaning later completions may not be reflected. More recent cohorts (2020–2022) naturally show fewer Potential Completers because they have had less time to reach 60+ credit hours.
3. Labor Market Coverage: Wage data from TWC cover only employment in Texas subject to unemployment insurance reporting. Individuals working out of state, self-employed, or employed in exempt sectors are not represented.
4. Credit Attribution and Transfer Complexity: Credit hour calculations do not always capture nuances such as repeated courses, unaccepted transfer credits, or institutional discrepancies in course equivalencies.
5. Non-Academic Factors: The dataset does not include qualitative data such as student motivation, family circumstances, or health-related interruptions that may influence persistence or completion.