

# Nine

Dramatically increase  
college completion rates

**WE RECOMMEND** that institutions of higher education set out to dramatically increase college completion rates by improving retention, easing transfer among institutions and implementing data-based strategies to identify retention and dropout challenges.

Increasing college graduation, or completion, rates is essential to reaching the commission's goal. The commission noted that it is imperative for institutions to have the determination to understand why some students do not graduate, with the hope of developing and implementing interventions that will enhance graduation rates across all student groups.

Increasing college completion rates will be more challenging in light of projected demographic changes that vary across states.<sup>67</sup> The greatest growth in high school graduates will be among groups who historically have not had as much access to or success in higher education. The commission's goal cannot be met without a substantial commitment by states and institutions to eliminate racial and ethnic gaps in degree completion. States will have to develop and differentiate strategies geared toward the particular needs of their population. Policymakers will need to consider the impact of both demographic changes and the current economic crisis in order to implement effective approaches that improve graduation rates.

It is important to understand the difference between educational attainment rates and graduation rates in order to avoid confusing the two concepts. The former is the focus of the commission's overall goal, while the latter is the focus of this recommendation. While graduation rates affect educational attainment rates, the two are distinctly different measures.

Educational attainment is based on the highest level of education completed by an individual, regardless of when or where a person started or finished their education, how long he or she took to earn the degree or whether the individual attended on a part- or full-time basis. These estimates are useful for making judgments about how well educated the United States is in comparison to other nations.

Graduation rates provide important insights into the success of institutions, states and the country as a whole in moving students in a timely manner from the point of entry to degree attainment. As mandated by Congress, they are based on first-time, full-time students entering a two- or four-year college at a specific point in time and graduating from that same institution within a particular amount of time. These estimates provide insights into postsecondary outcomes, but they are not useful for comparing the United States to other nations because of the differences in how graduation rates are defined and calculated in various countries.

**In understanding the degree to which the nation is increasing completion rates, three indicators may prove fruitful to policymakers and educators:**

- Freshman-to-sophomore retention;
- Graduation rates of associate degree- and certificate-seeking students;
- Graduation rates of bachelor's degree-seeking students; and
- Degrees Awarded at Colleges and Universities.

67. For more details, see *Knocking at the College Door*. (2008). (Boulder: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education).

## General Findings for This Recommendation

- As of 2008, 60.0 percent of full-time freshmen at public two-year colleges return for the sophomore year.
- As of 2008, 69.0 percent of full-time freshmen at private, for-profit, two-year colleges return for the sophomore year.
- As of 2008, 78.2 percent of full-time freshmen at public four-year colleges return for the sophomore year.
- As of 2008, 79.1 percent of full-time freshmen at private, not-for-profit, four-year colleges return for the sophomore year.
- As of 2008, 27.5 percent of full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.
- As of 2008, 22.6 percent of full-time African American degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.
- As of 2008, 24.9 percent of full-time American Indian or Alaska Native degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.
- As of 2008, 25.7 percent of full-time Hispanic degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.
- As of 2008, 34.1 percent of full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in four years or less.
- As of 2008, 57.7 percent of full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.
- As of 2008, 38.5 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.
- As of 2008, 40.5 percent of African American full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.
- As of 2008, 49.4 percent of Hispanic full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.
- As of 2008, 60.6 percent of full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in eight years or less.
- As of 2009, the number of associate degrees has increased 36.0 percent from 1,159,550 in 2001 to 1,577,136 in 2009.
- As of 2009, the number of bachelor's degrees has increased 29.6 percent from 2,597,018 in 2001 to 3,366,858 in 2009.
- As of 2009, 1.1 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives.
- As of 2009, 5.3 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
- As of 2009, 13.1 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to African Americans.
- As of 2009, 12.7 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to Hispanics.

- As of 2009, 67.8 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to whites.
- As of 2009, 0.8 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives.
- As of 2009, 7.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
- As of 2009, 9.8 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to African Americans.
- As of 2009, 8.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to Hispanics.
- As of 2009, 73.8 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to whites.
- As of 2009, 62.1 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to females.
- As of 2009, 57.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to females.
- As of 2009, 19.6 percent of all degrees are awarded in business, management and marketing.
- As of 2009, 17.7 percent of all degrees are awarded in health professions and clinical sciences.
- As of 2009, 9.8 percent of all degrees are awarded in education.
- As of 2009, 3.3 percent of all degrees are awarded engineering.

# 60.0%

As of 2008, 60.0 percent of full-time freshmen at public two-year colleges return for the sophomore year.

▲ **1.0ppts** 2007–2008

# 69.0%

As of 2008, 69.0 percent of full-time freshmen at private for-profit two-year colleges return for the sophomore year.

▲ **4.1ppts** 2007–2008

## Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This indicator represents the persistence of students from freshman to sophomore year and provides insights into students' progress through the postsecondary education system. This measure is important in ensuring that students are on track to complete an associate or bachelor's degree in a timely manner.

Retention rates are calculated by aggregating, by sector and/or state, the institution-level adjusted entering cohorts and the number of students from these cohorts that enroll the following fall. Estimates therefore can be interpreted as a percentage of students in the given sector and/or state.

Given that students enter college with a variety of objectives (e.g., work and study versus solely study) and that institutions have varying missions, we have presented a variety of sectors for both full- and part-time students. This provides a more nuanced picture of retention across the nation's institutions — one that is sometimes lost in favor of presenting a single statistic.

### What are the policy issues associated with this measure?

Persistence indicators are one of the tools used to better understand the nature of educational progress and the challenges faced by institutions or a state as a whole for increasing educational attainment. In the words of Amy Guidera from the Data Quality Campaign, "We need to use data as a flashlight, not a hammer."<sup>68</sup> The appropriate context (e.g., institutional mission) should be taken into account when considering whether persistence indicators such as retention can or should be used as accountability measures. These data are aggregated across institutions in order to provide a weighted average for states and the nation. Larger institutions thus have more of an impact on state results. Policymakers should consider the range of institutional outcomes that contribute to overall state figures when developing strategies to improve retention.

Institutions should make every effort to learn from students who are not retained (e.g., through exit surveys) in order to develop policies that result in the best outcomes for the students and for the institutions. Administrators and faculty should examine the ways in which they can improve the transition of new students from the first day of orientation to sophomore year.

68. Guidera, Amy. (2010, June). Speech presented in conjunction with *Education Week's "Diplomas Count"* press conference at the National Press Club, Washington, DC.

# 78.2%

As of 2008, 78.2 percent of full-time freshmen at public four-year colleges return for the sophomore year.

◀▶ 2007–2008

# 79.1%

As of 2008, 79.1 percent of full-time freshmen at private not-for-profit four-year colleges return for the sophomore year.

◀▶ 2007–2008

**Where are we now?** As of 2008, 60.0 percent of full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking freshmen at public two-year colleges are retained from freshman to sophomore year (Figure 9.1a). Part-time students account for approximately four of every 10 freshmen in this sector, and only 40.1 percent of these part-time students return for sophomore year (Figure 9.1b). When disaggregated by state, the full-time freshman-to-sophomore retention rate at public two-year colleges ranges from 47.7 percent in Louisiana to 68.6 percent in California (Figure 9.1c). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest retention rates for this sector are California, North Dakota, South Dakota, Florida and New York. The states with the lowest retention rates are Louisiana, Montana, Alaska, West Virginia and Oklahoma.

As of 2008, 78.2 percent of full-time, first-time degree-seeking freshmen at public four-year colleges are retained from freshman to sophomore year (Figure 9.1a). Part-time students account for a small proportion (roughly 5 percent) of the overall freshmen enrollment in this sector, and 47.7 percent of these part-time students who enter in the fall return for sophomore year (Figure 9.1b). When disaggregated by state, the full-time freshman-to-sophomore retention rate at public four-year colleges ranges from 39.5 percent in the District of Columbia to 86.1 percent in Virginia (Figure 9.1d). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest retention rates for this sector are Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, California and New Hampshire. The states with the lowest retention rates are District of Columbia, Idaho, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Montana.

As of 2008, 79.1 percent of full-time, first-time degree-seeking freshmen at private not-for-profit four-year colleges are retained from freshman to sophomore year (Figure 9.1a). As in the public four-year sector, part-time students account for only a few percentage points of the first-year enrollment, and 43.6 percent of these part-time students who enter in fall return for sophomore year (Figure 9.1b). When disaggregated by state, the full-time freshman-to-sophomore retention rate at private not-for-profit four-year colleges ranges from 57.2 percent in Delaware to 87.3 percent in the District of Columbia (Figure 9.1e). When placed in rank order, the states with the highest retention rates for this sector are District of Columbia, California, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Connecticut. The states with the lowest retention rates are Delaware, Nevada, Michigan, Kansas and Hawaii.

Despite gains between 2007 and 2008, the full-time freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is lowest among private for-profit four-year colleges, where just under half of freshmen return for sophomore year (Figure 9.1a). Part-time students make up roughly one-quarter of first-time, degree-seeking freshmen in this sector, and 43.2 percent of these part-time students who enter in fall return for sophomore year (Figure 9.1b).

**When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?** Retention is based solely on continuing within the institution in which one originally enrolled. Students who successfully transfer to other institutions count against the original institution but do not impact the receiving institution.

Caution is warranted when interpreting the estimates related to for-profit and private not-for-profit sectors in this indicator. The number of for-profit institutions grew significantly between fall 2007 and fall 2008 and the underlying enrollment changed as well. This results in less stable estimates for this sector. Also, there are very few private not-for-profit two-year institutions, which also leads to unstable estimates.

Finally, as indicated above, the proportion of first-time students who are enrolled part-time versus full-time varied substantially by sector. For example, part-time students account for a much larger portion of the student enrollment at public two-year colleges compared to public four-year colleges. This should be considered when examining the part- and full-time retention rates for these sectors.

The estimates contained in this report should not be compared against estimates based on the 2003–2006 surveys. Retention rates were collected on the 2003–2006 IPEDS enrollment surveys, but institutions were calculating and reporting retention rates based on different student groups (e.g., full-time students versus all students; original versus adjusted cohort). This led to changes in the 2007 survey, whereby institutions now report the raw numbers for clearly defined cohorts. IPEDS then calculates the rates for institutions based on these raw numbers.

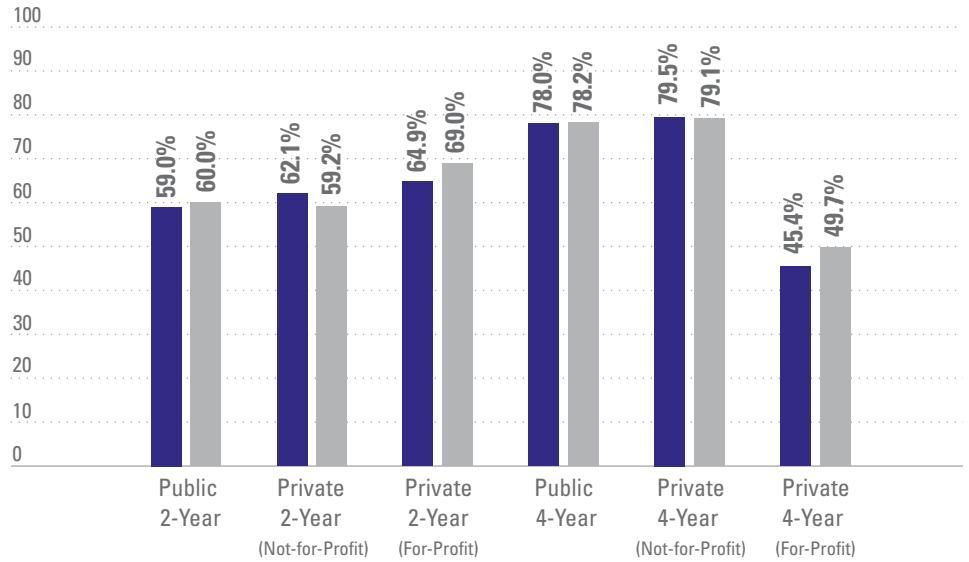
9.1a

**National Full-Time Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates, 2007–2008**

Updated data source 

Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2007–2008

■ 2007  
■ 2008



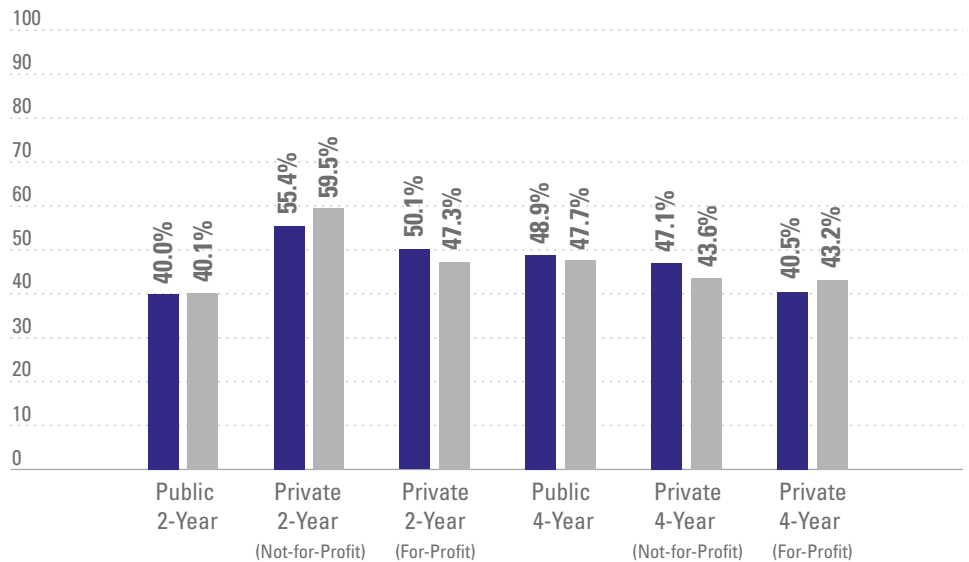
9.1b

**National Part-Time Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates, 2007–2008**

Updated data source 

Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2007–2008

■ 2007  
■ 2008



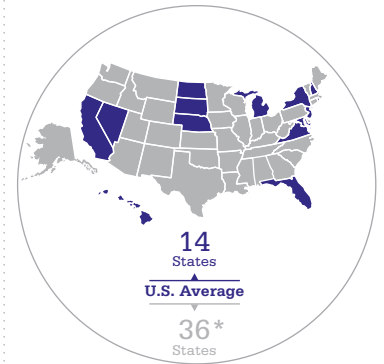
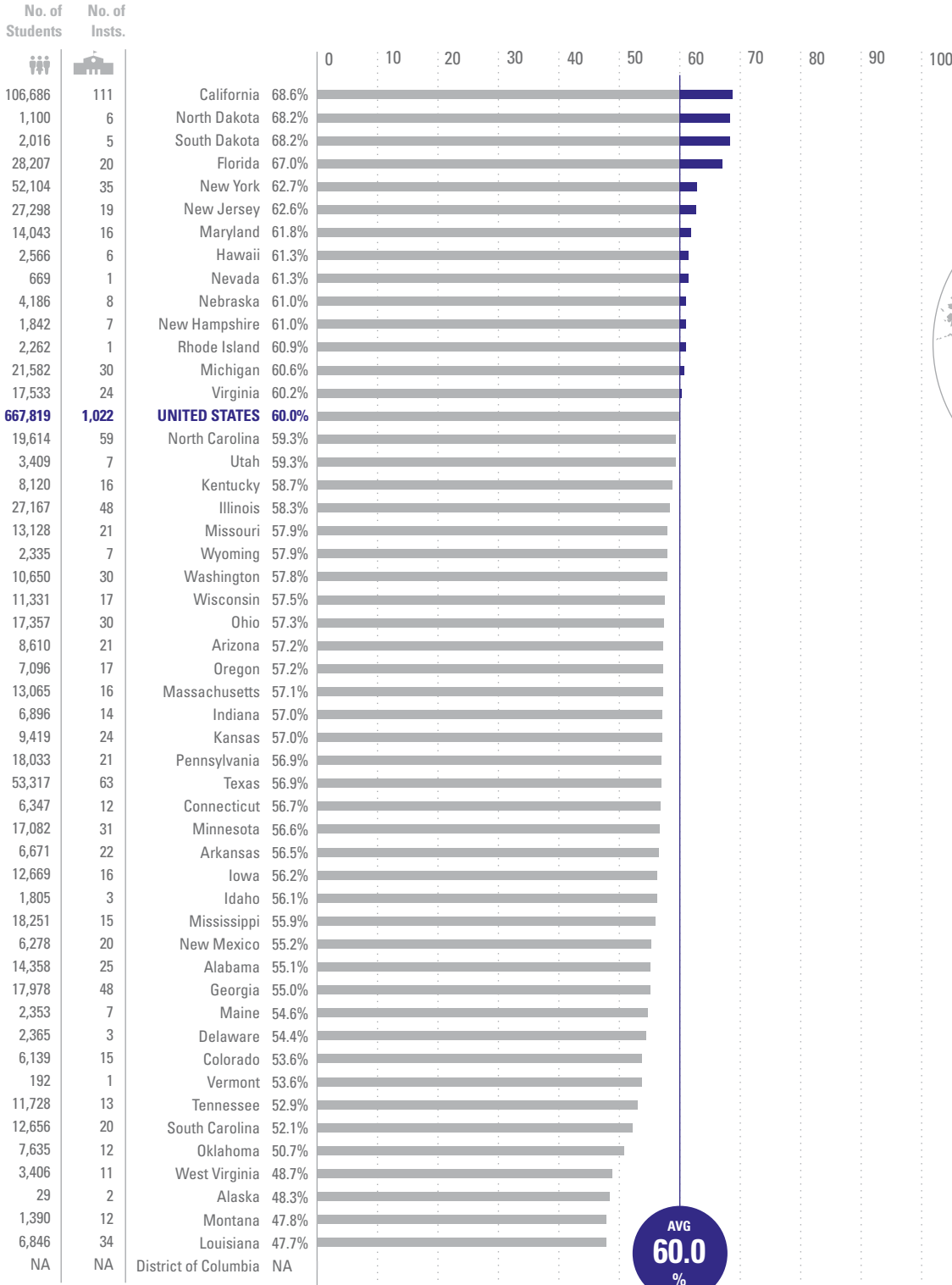
9.1c

**Full-Time Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates at Public Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**60.0**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

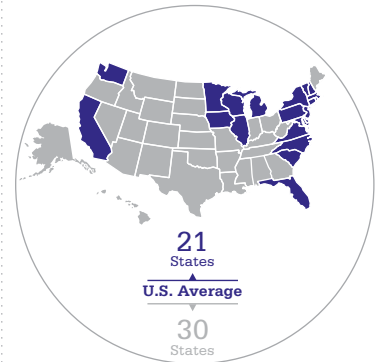
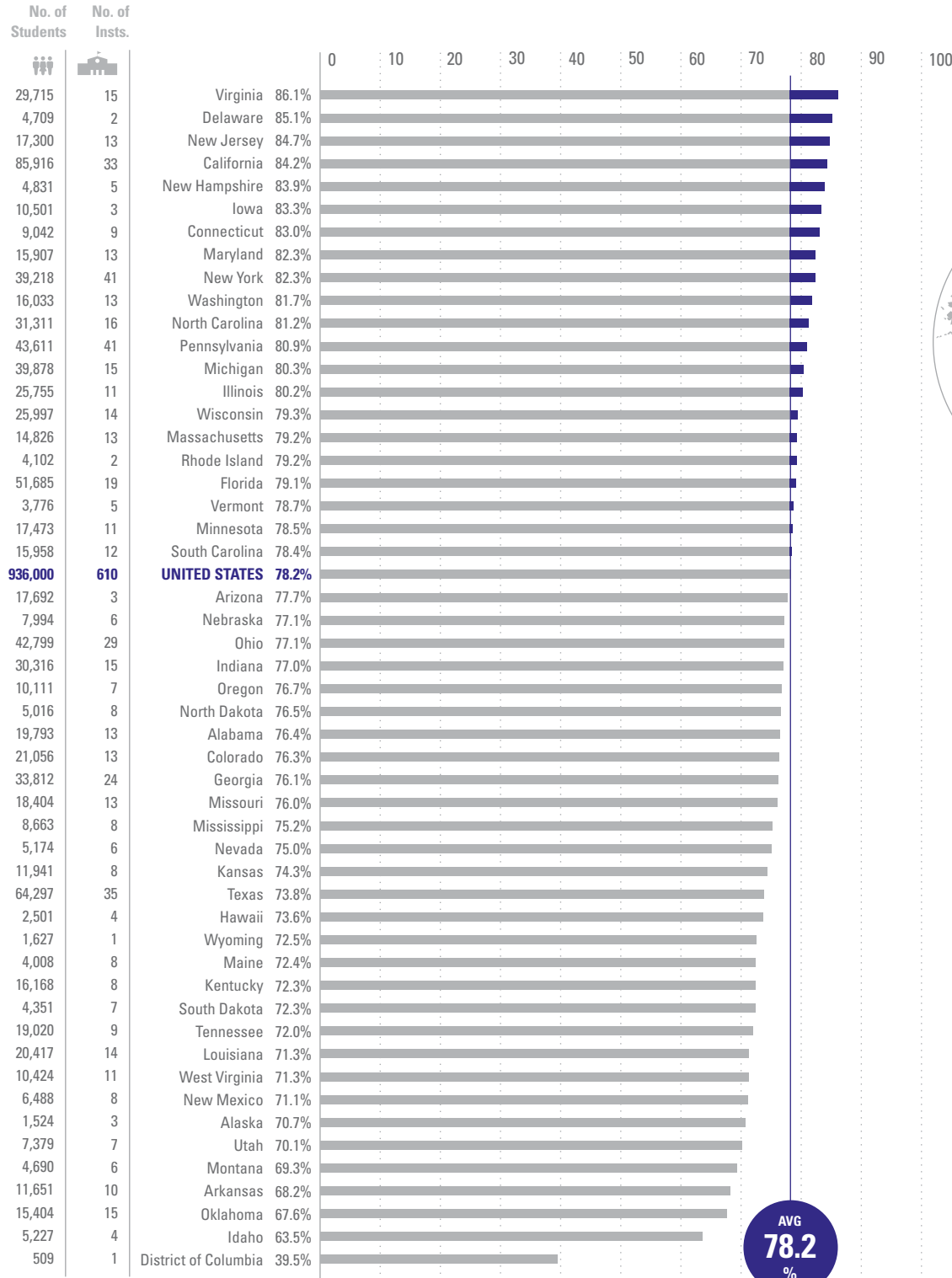
9.1d

**Full-Time Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates at Public Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**78.2**  
%

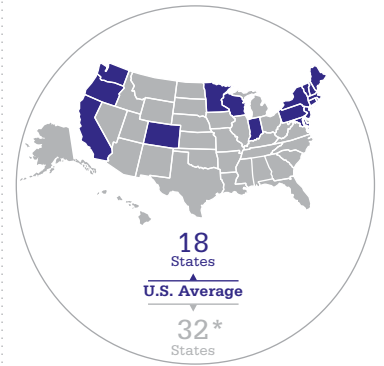
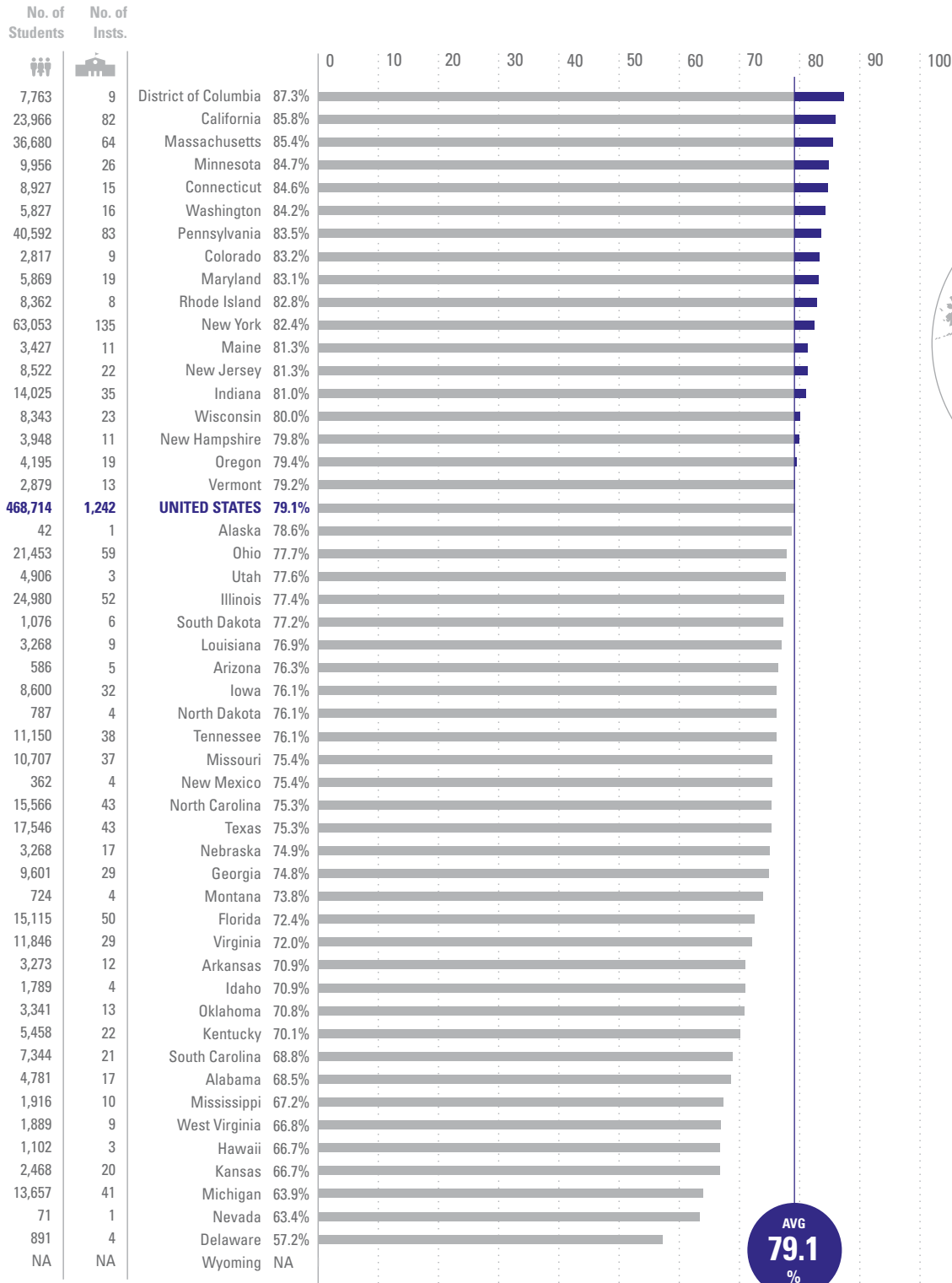
9.1e

**Full-Time Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates at Private Not-for-Profit Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Enrollment and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**79.1**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

# 27.5%

As of 2008, 27.5 percent of full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.

◀▶ 2007–2008

# 22.6%

As of 2008, 22.6 percent of full-time African American degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.

▼ 3.8ppts 2007–2008

## Graduation Rates of Associate Degree– and Certificate-Seeking Students

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This measure builds upon the retention indicator to provide a more complete picture of the educational progress of college students in the United States. The majority of data in this indicator reflect the proportion of first-time, full-time associate degree- or certificate-seeking students who graduate within 150 percent of normal program length (i.e., three years). In addition, four-year graduation rates (200 percent of normal program length) are available for the first time and are included in this indicator. Graduation rates are calculated by aggregating, across institutions in a given state and/or sector, the institution-level adjusted entering cohorts and the number of students from these cohorts who graduate within the appropriate time frame. Estimates therefore can be interpreted as a percentage of students in the given sector and/or state.

The measure is central to the commission's goal because of the role that two-year colleges play in the higher education system. This role may become increasingly important because of the changing demographics described in the introduction to this section and the economic challenges faced by a growing number of Americans.

The data are disaggregated by state, race/ethnicity and institutional control (i.e., public, private not-for-profit, private for-profit) to help states understand the differential outcomes across groups and to illustrate the state's overall graduation rate as a function of the varying performance of students in different types of institutions.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** Addressing socioeconomic, racial and ethnic inequalities in higher education requires persistent and meaningful efforts by states to provide postsecondary access and opportunity to the steadily growing numbers of undereducated and underrepresented minorities. Beyond the moral imperative to achieve equity among populations of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, there are economic reasons for doing so.

Policymakers should consider both the challenges and opportunities facing two-year colleges in light of current economic conditions. Many adults are returning to the educational pipeline in order to build skills and increase future job opportunities. At the same time, budget cuts threaten funding in this vital sector.

# 24.9%

As of 2008, 24.9 percent of full-time American Indian or Alaska Native degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.

▲ 3.7ppts 2007–2008

# 25.7%

As of 2008, 25.7 percent of full-time Hispanic degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in three years or less.

▲ 7.6ppts 2007–2008

Graduation rates have been a part of the higher education landscape since Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know Act in 1990. They are the primary national, standardized measure of postsecondary outcomes. However, policymakers should consider the significance and meaning of high or low graduation rates. The appropriate context should be taken into account when considering whether persistence indicators such as graduation rates can or should be used as accountability measures. Institutions vary in their missions, as well as in the composition of entering students — factors that should be recognized when interpreting estimates, particularly at the institutional level. Institutions that aim to educate low-income, first-generation, traditionally underserved students will face substantially different enrollment, retention and graduation challenges compared to institutions that attract most of their students from the top of the nation's high school graduating classes. Policymakers should seek to understand the benefits and limitations of graduation rates in order to better serve all constituents.

**Where are we now?** As of 2008, 27.5 percent of first-time, full-time associate degree- or certificate-seeking students in the nation's two-year colleges graduate within three years (Figure 9.2a). This estimate dropped slightly from a high of 30.5 percent in 2003. Graduation rates vary by sector, such that 20.6 percent of these students in public two-year colleges graduate within three years, compared to 48.3 percent and 57.7 percent at private not-for-profit and for-profit two-year colleges, respectively. Public institutions account for nearly four out of five first-time, full-time students at two-year colleges and thus shape states' overall estimates.

Three-year graduation rates of first-time, full-time students at two-year colleges vary by race/ethnicity and sector (Figures 9.2b, 9.2g–9.2k). Asian students have the highest three-year graduation rate (31.5 percent), followed by white students (28.5 percent), Hispanic students (25.7 percent), American Indian students (24.9 percent), and African American students (22.6 percent). When disaggregated by state, the three-year graduation rate at two-year colleges ranges from 9.0 percent in Delaware to 60.0 percent in Wyoming (Figure 9.2c). Private for-profit institutions greatly influence overall three-year graduation rates in states such as Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Wyoming (Figure 9.2f).

When comparing three-year graduation rates against four-year graduation rates, it is clear that the additional year affords a substantial number of students the opportunity to complete their degrees. For example, while 27.8 percent of first-time, full-time associate degree- or certificate-seeking students who entered in fall 2004 graduate within three years (Figure 9.2a), 34.1 percent of these students graduate within four years (Figure 9.2l). When disaggregated by state, the four-year graduation rate ranges from 18.0 percent in Delaware to 74.1 percent in South Dakota (Figure 9.2m).

# 34.1%

As of 2008, 34.1 percent of full-time, degree- or certificate-seeking students at two-year colleges graduate in four years or less.

### **When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?**

Because of the manner in which data are collected in the IPEDS graduation survey, researchers are unable to separate associate degree-seeking students from certificate-seeking students. One concern is that the normal time to completion varies across certificate programs, whereas it is more standardized for associate programs. Given the emphasis of the commission goal on obtaining an associate degree or higher, data would ideally be presented for associate degree-seeking students only. This presents a challenge for using this indicator to examine issues related to degree attainment among students at two-year colleges.

The limitations of these graduation rates deserve consideration. For example, as was the case with the previous indicator, graduation rates are based solely on degree completion within the institution in which one enrolled as a full-time, first-time student. In addition, they do not reflect part-time students, students who begin college in terms other than fall, or incoming transfer students who go on to successfully complete a degree. In fact, successful transfer students count against the original institution's graduation rate (which also influences estimates at the state level) and do nothing to benefit the receiving institution. Many policymakers and researchers have called for reforms to standardize the way that transfer rates are measured and reported by states and institutions. Because of the lack of the standardization of transfer rates, this indicator is not yet available to help contextualize the nation's success in increasing completion rates.

It is also important to consider that graduation rates are associated with many other factors not directly addressed in these data (e.g., first-generation status, academic preparation, socioeconomic background, adjustment to college, etc.). In addition, many students take longer than the traditional two-to-three year window to graduate, including students who begin as full-time students but spend most of their experience attending part time and students who must work while attending college. The inclusion of four-year graduation rates in this year's report is meant to address some of these limitations and provide a more complete picture of degree completion.

Recent changes in the rules regarding maintenance, collection, and reporting of federal data on race and ethnicity should be considered when interpreting data in this indicator. Institutions must now collect these data using a two-question format, in which the first assesses whether the individual is Hispanic/Latino (ethnicity), and the second evaluates whether the respondent is one or more of the following races: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or white. In addition, Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander was separated into two categories and a reporting category "two or more races" was introduced.

In the most recent graduation survey, institutions had the option to report under old or new race/ethnicity categories. IPEDS then derived a total, where the new category overlapped with the old. The data contained in this indicator reflect these derived categories. It is possible that the addition of “two or more races” in the new system changed how institutions reported students, which raises questions about the ability to compare estimates from the 2008 survey to those from previous or future years (when institutions will have fully transitioned to the new system).

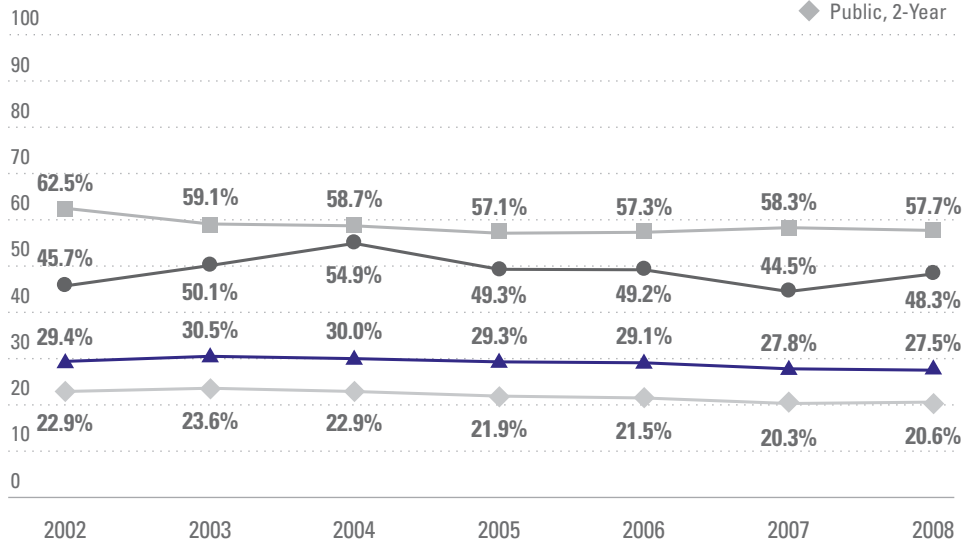
Finally, some estimates are based on a very small number of students, particularly when disaggregated by state by sector by ethnicity. Readers are advised to consider the number of institutions behind various estimates as well as the number of students who underlie these estimates. In some cases, institutional responses are altered by NCES to protect the privacy of students. Thus, the publicly available survey data may not reflect the exact value reported by institutions. The impact of this likely varies across figures within this indicator. For example, there is likely a greater impact on American Indian or Alaska Native estimates than there is for white students, since a greater number of institutional responses regarding American Indian or Alaska Natives may have been altered by NCES. Similarly, estimates based on the cumulative responses of many small colleges may be impacted more than those based on the cumulative responses of larger colleges.

9.2a

**National Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges, 2002–2008**

Updated data source

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2002–2008

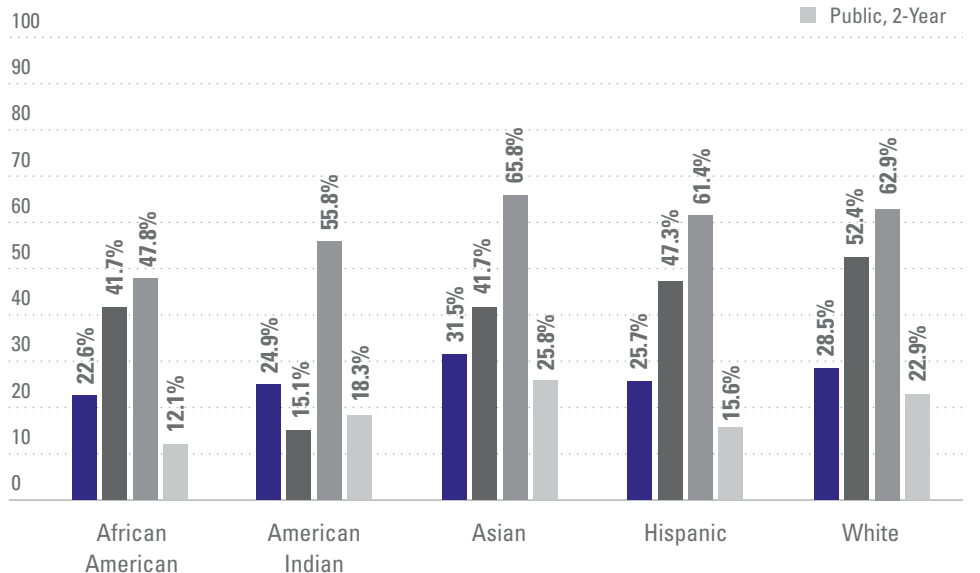


9.2b

**National Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by Race/Ethnicity, 2008**

Updated data source

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



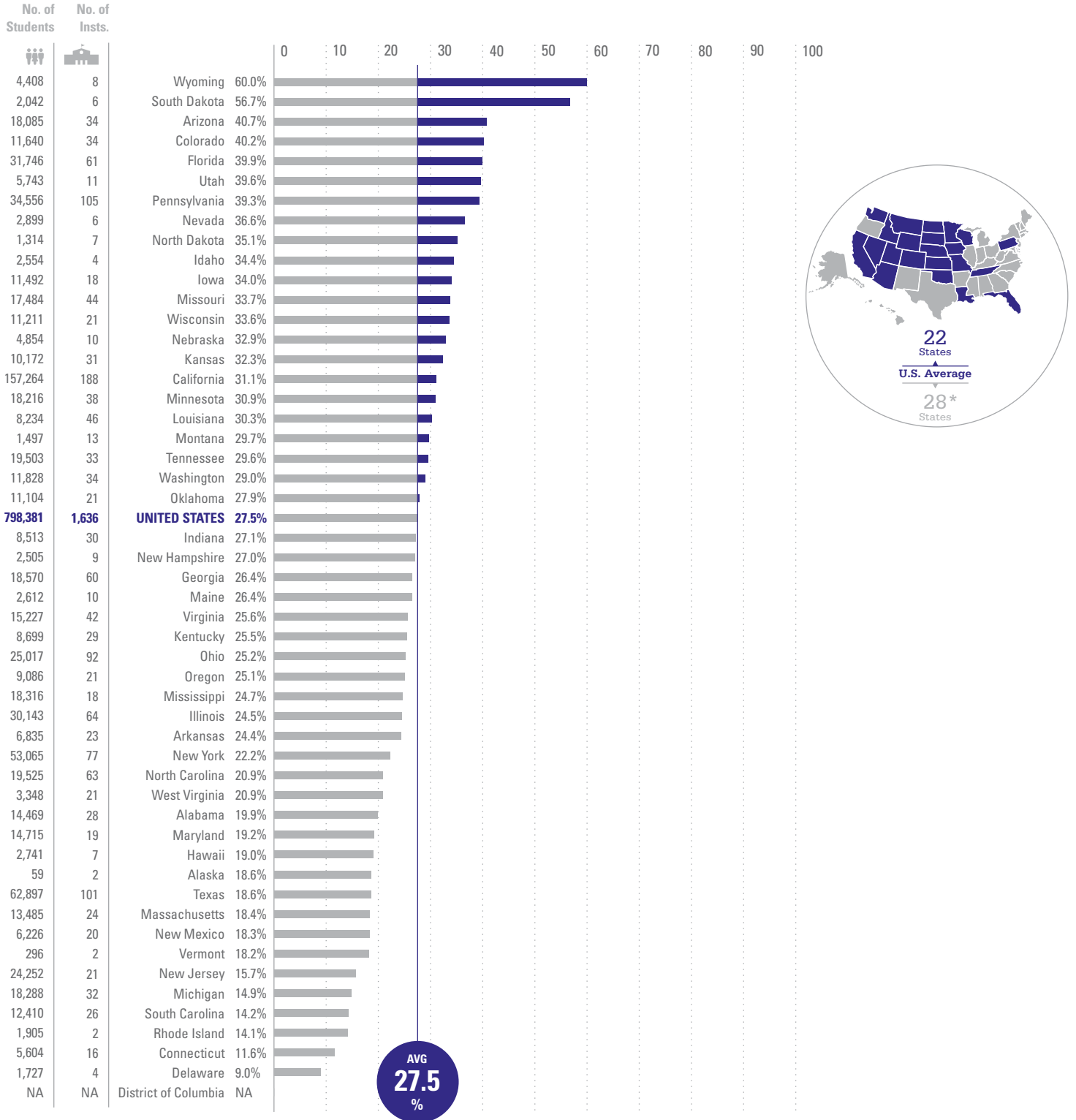
9.2c

**Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



\* Indicator data not available for all states.

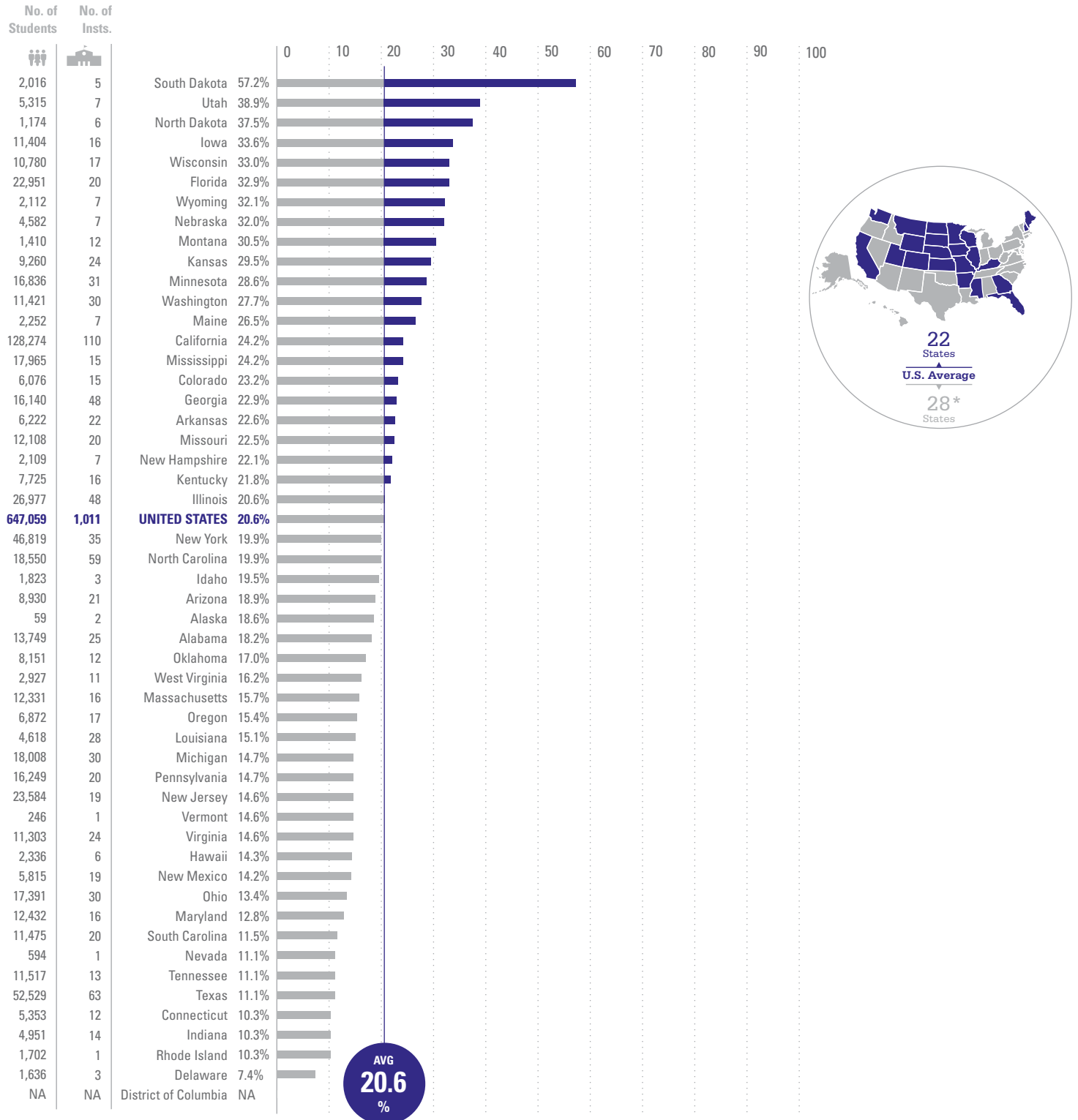
9.2d

**Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Public Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



\* Indicator data not available for all states.

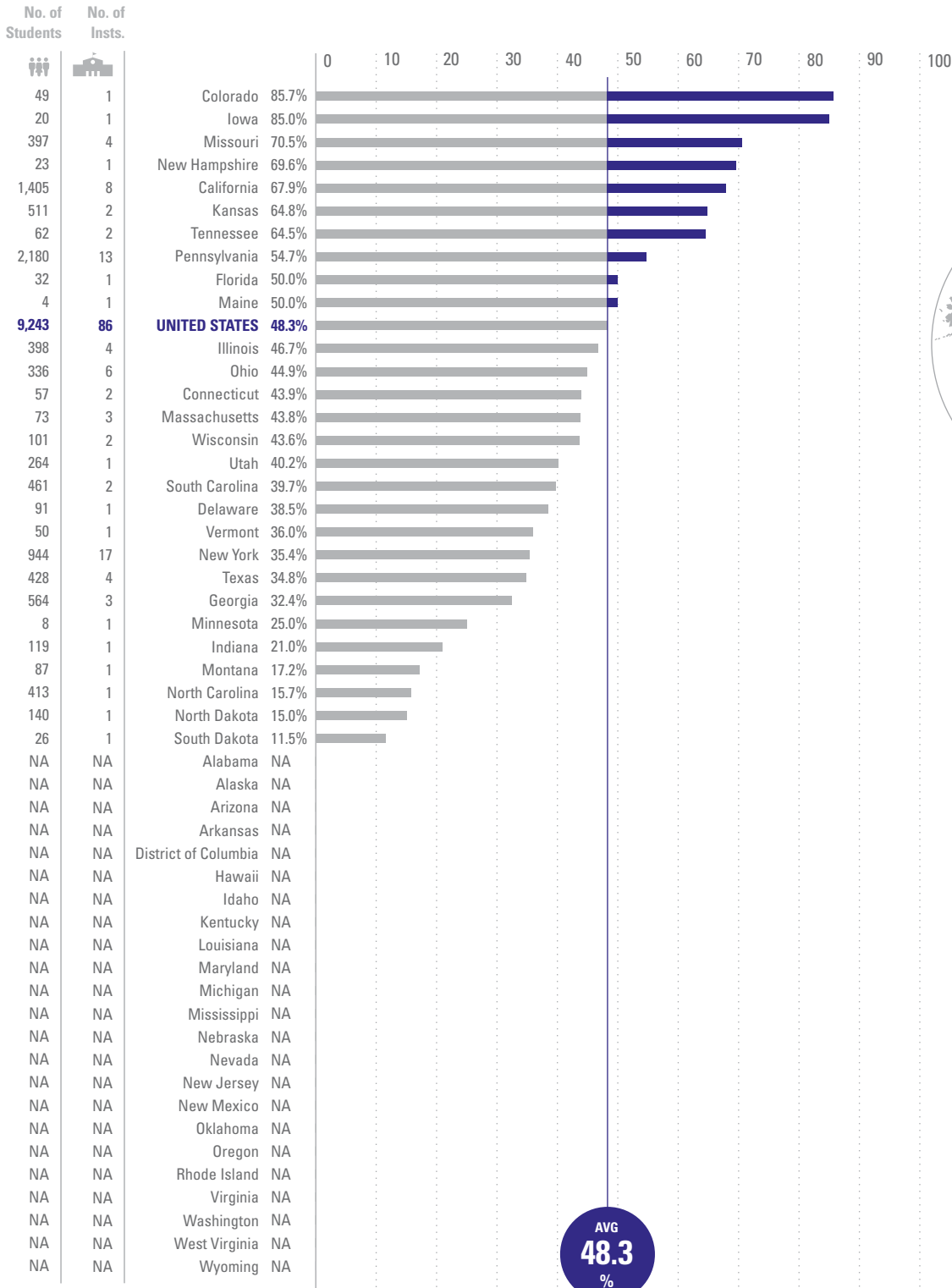
9.2e

### Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Private Not-for-Profit Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



\* Indicator data not available for all states.

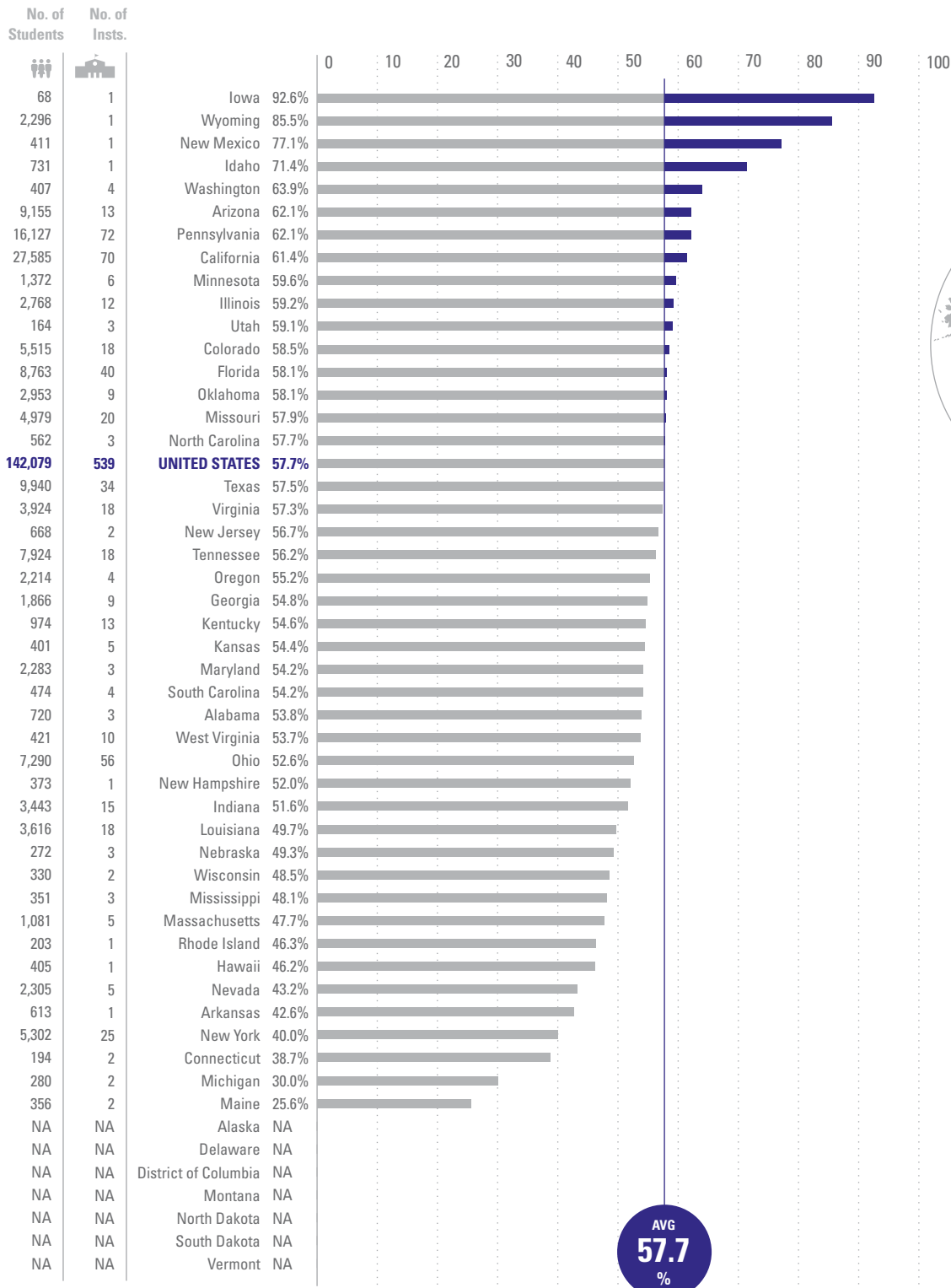
9.2f

### Three-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Private For-Profit Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



\* Indicator data not available for all states.

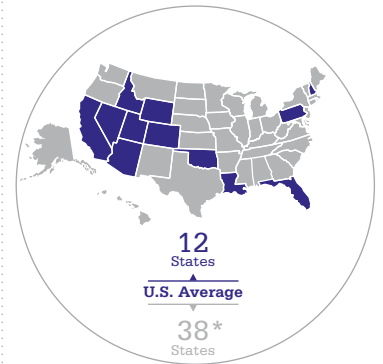
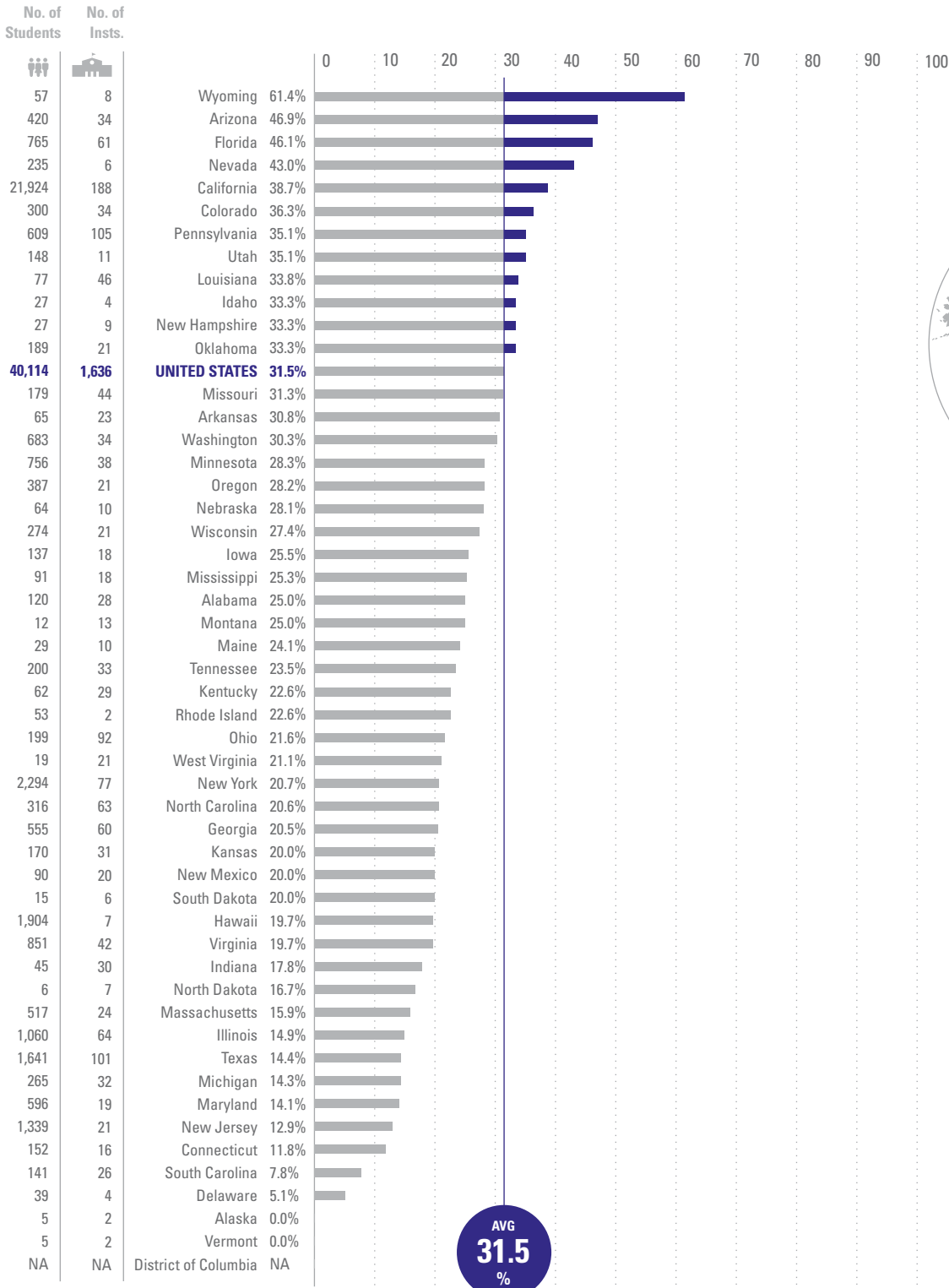
9.2g

**Three-Year Graduation Rates of Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



**AVG**  
**31.5**  
**%**

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

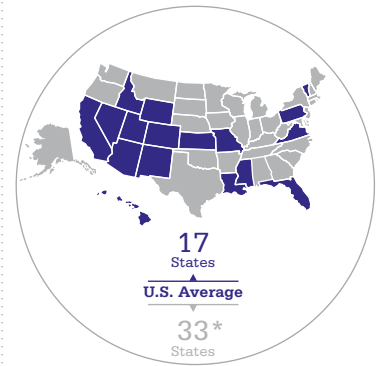
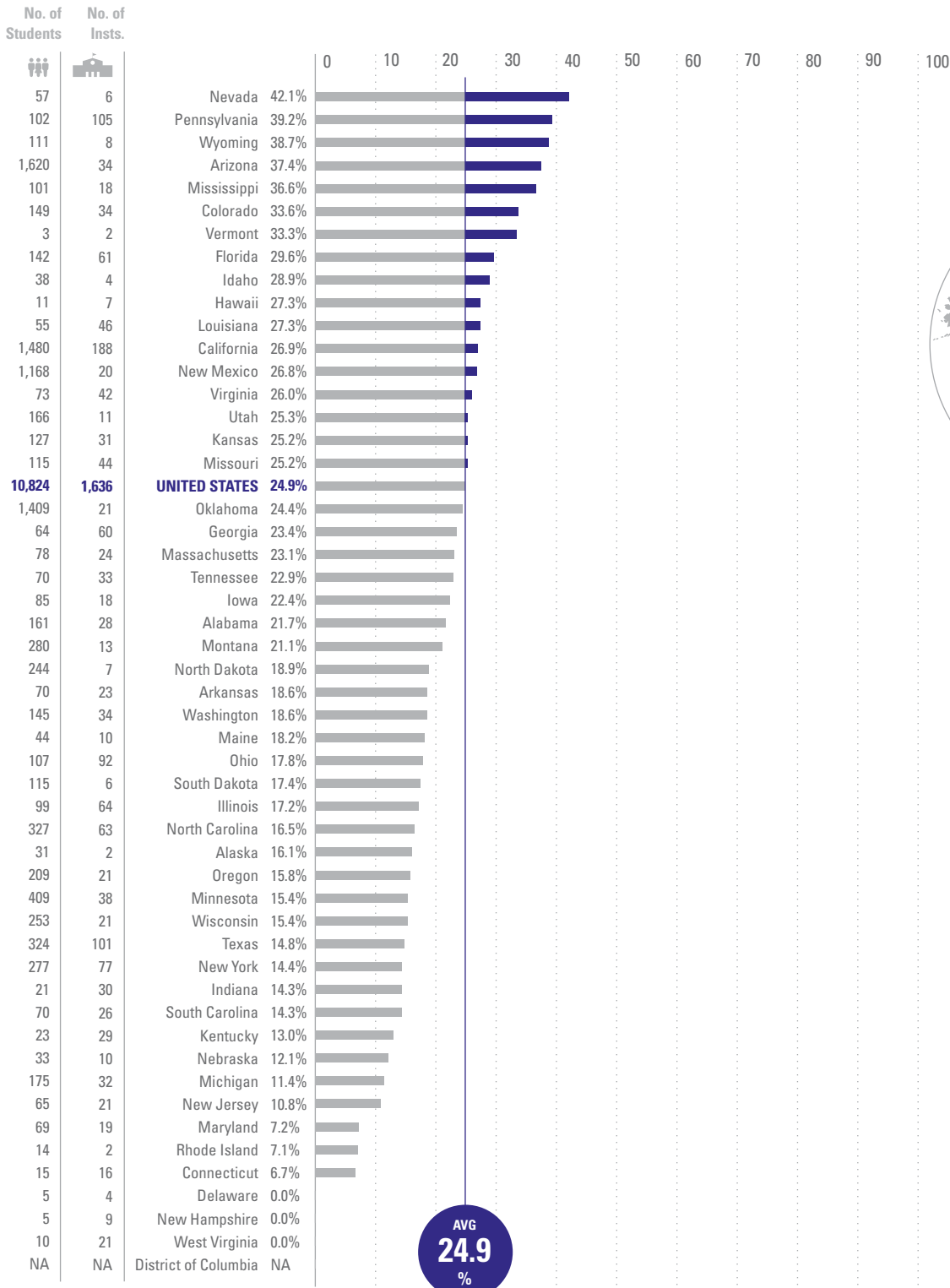
9.2h

### Three-Year Graduation Rates of American Indian or Alaska Native Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
24.9  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

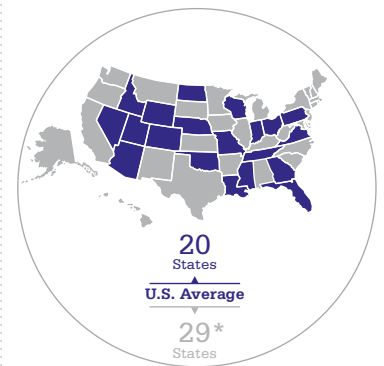
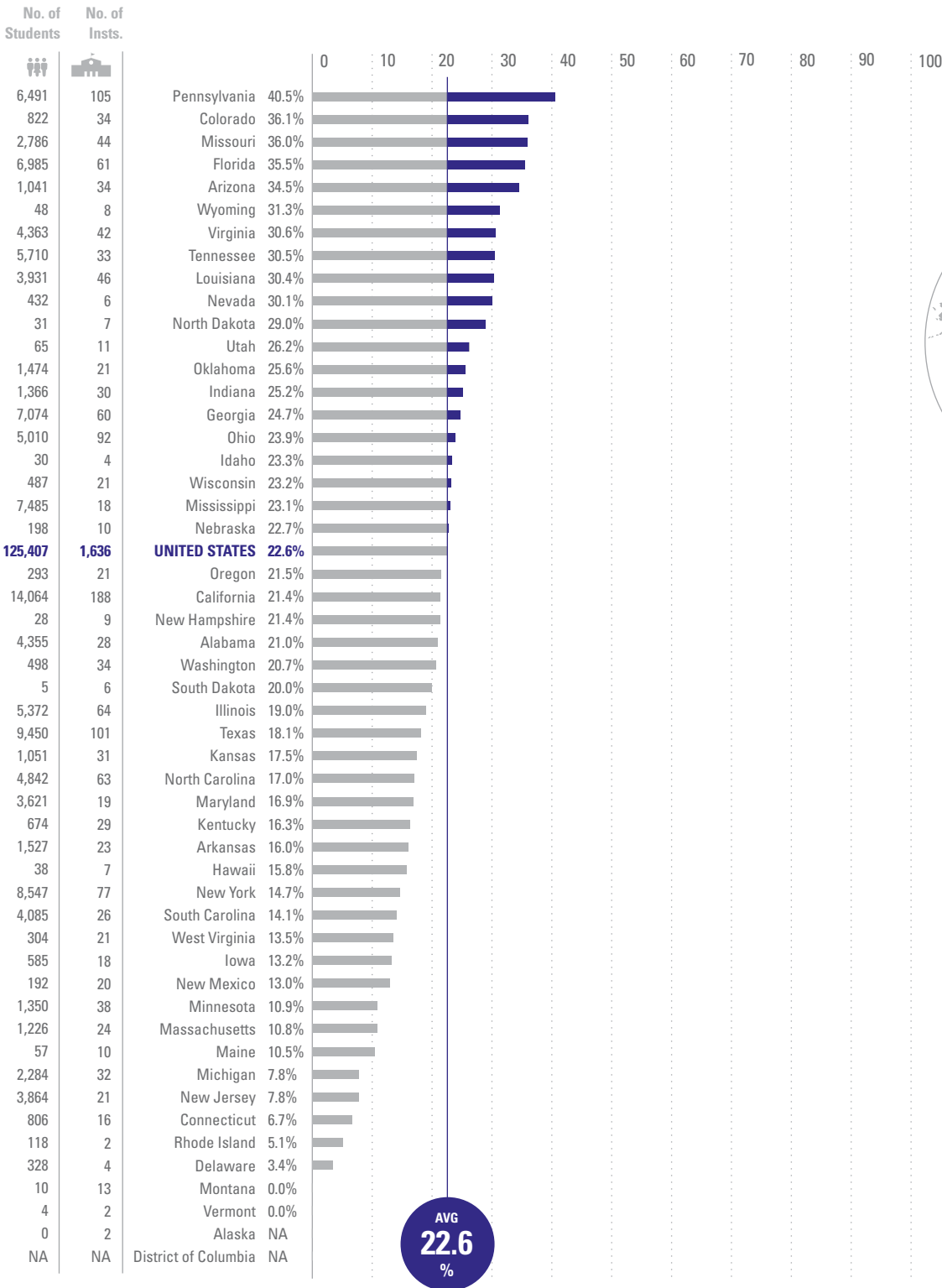
9.2i

### Three-Year Graduation Rates of African American Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**22.6**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

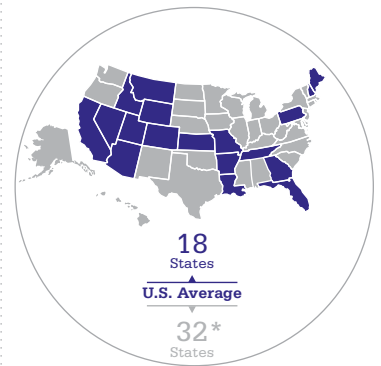
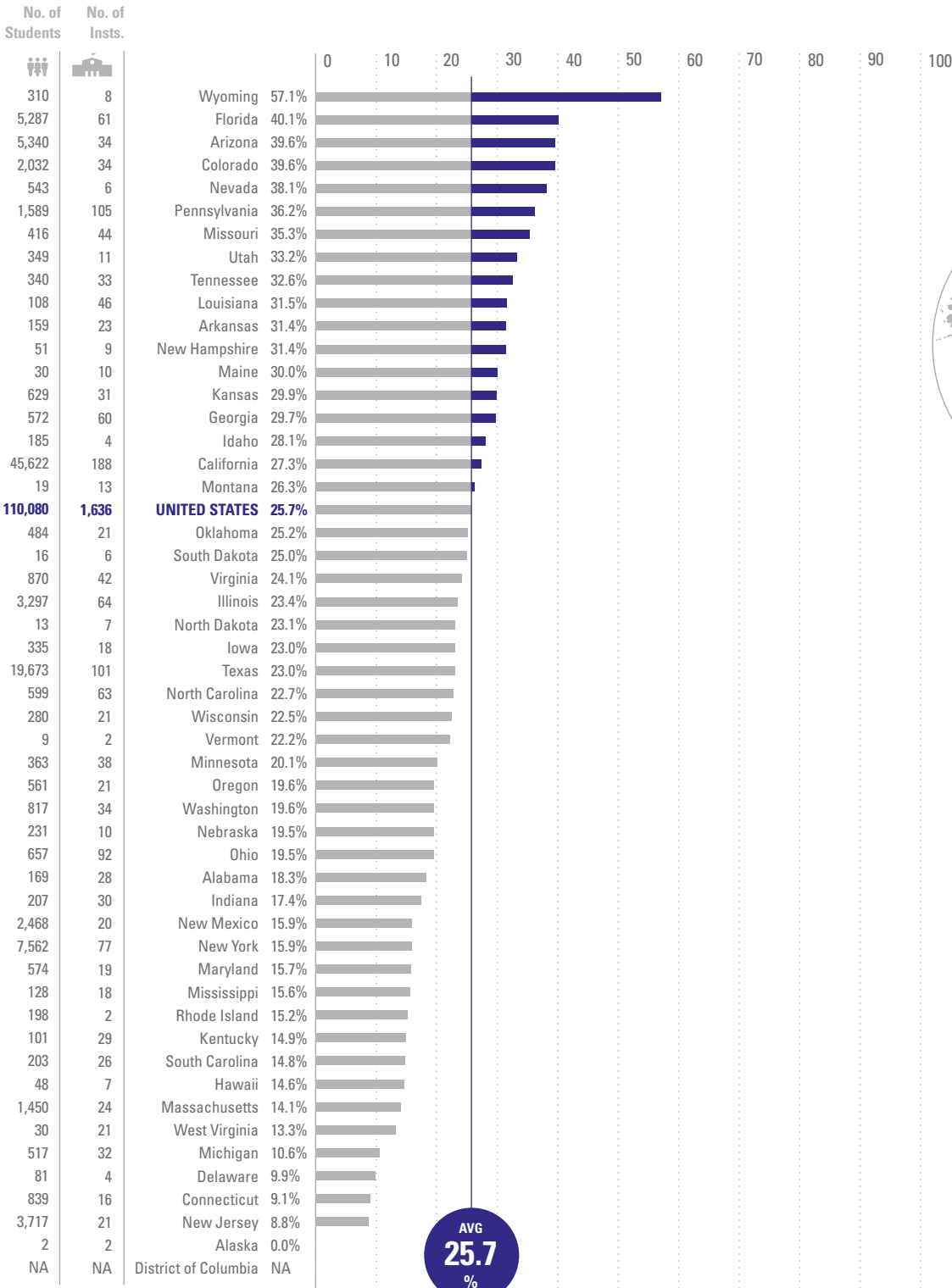
9.2j

**Three-Year Graduation Rates of Hispanic Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



**AVG**  
**25.7**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

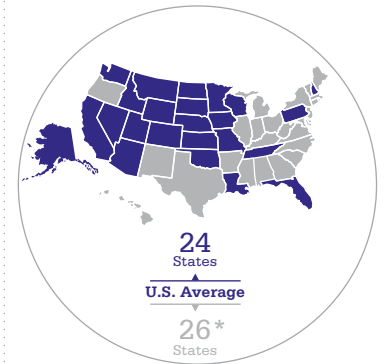
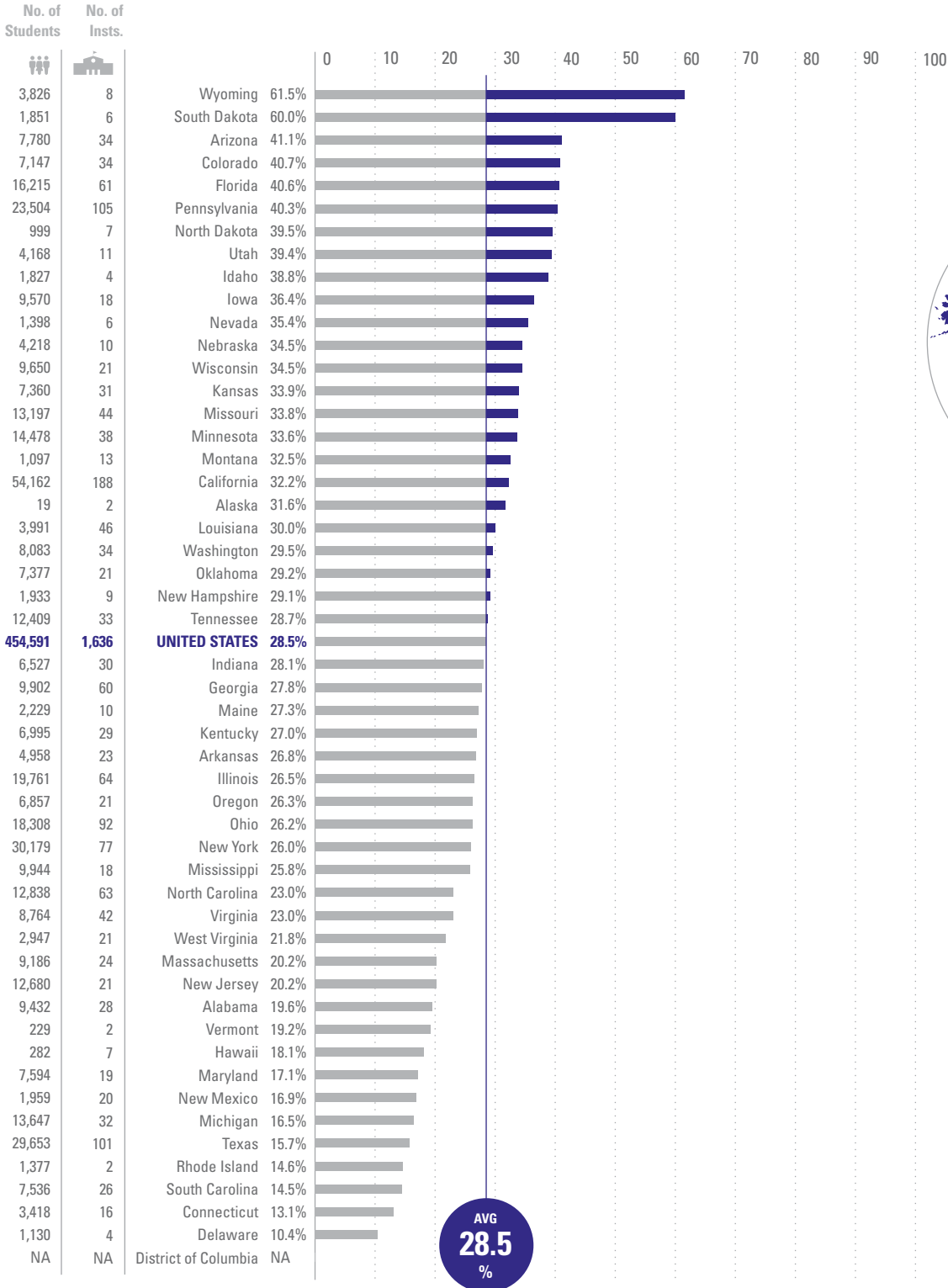
9.2k

**Three-Year Graduation Rates of White Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**28.5**  
%

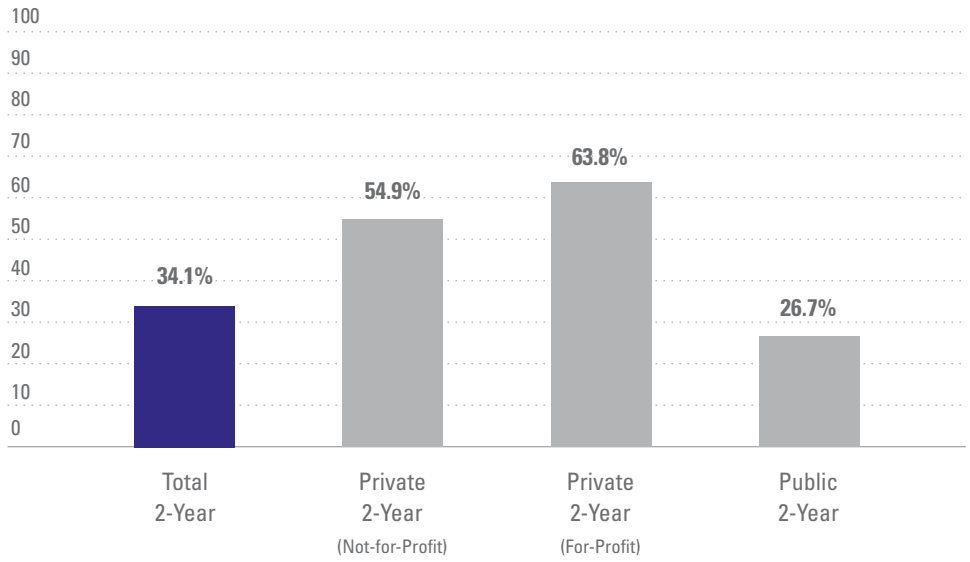
\* Indicator data not available for all states.

9.21

**National Four-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



\* Includes both for-profit and not-for-profit institutions.

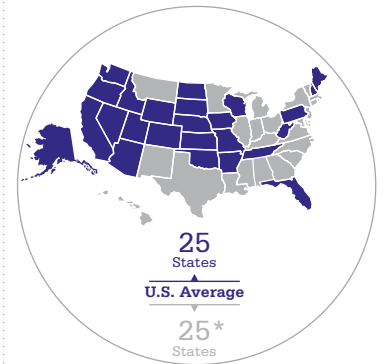
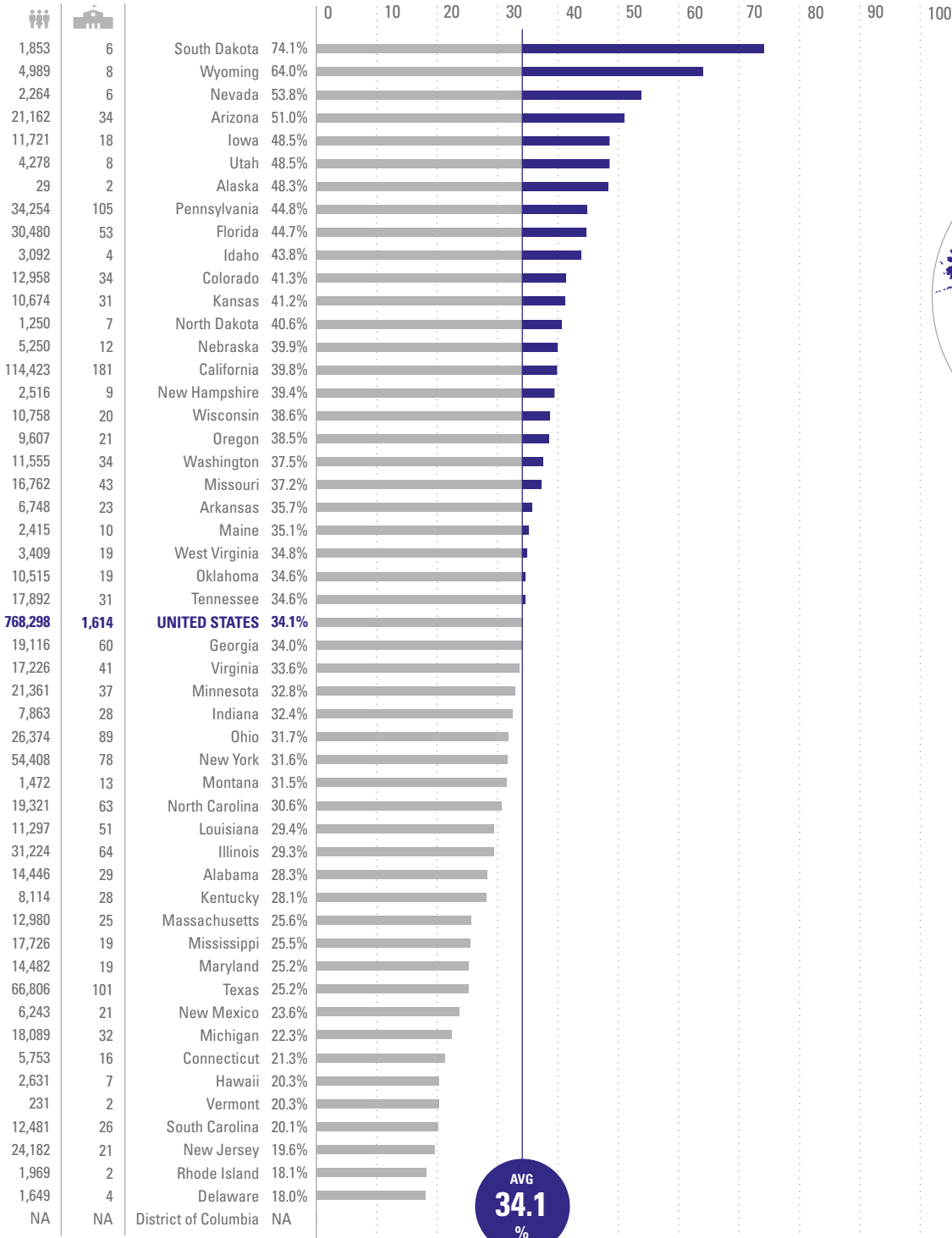
9.2m

### Four-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008

No. of Students No. of Insts.



AVG  
**34.1**  
%

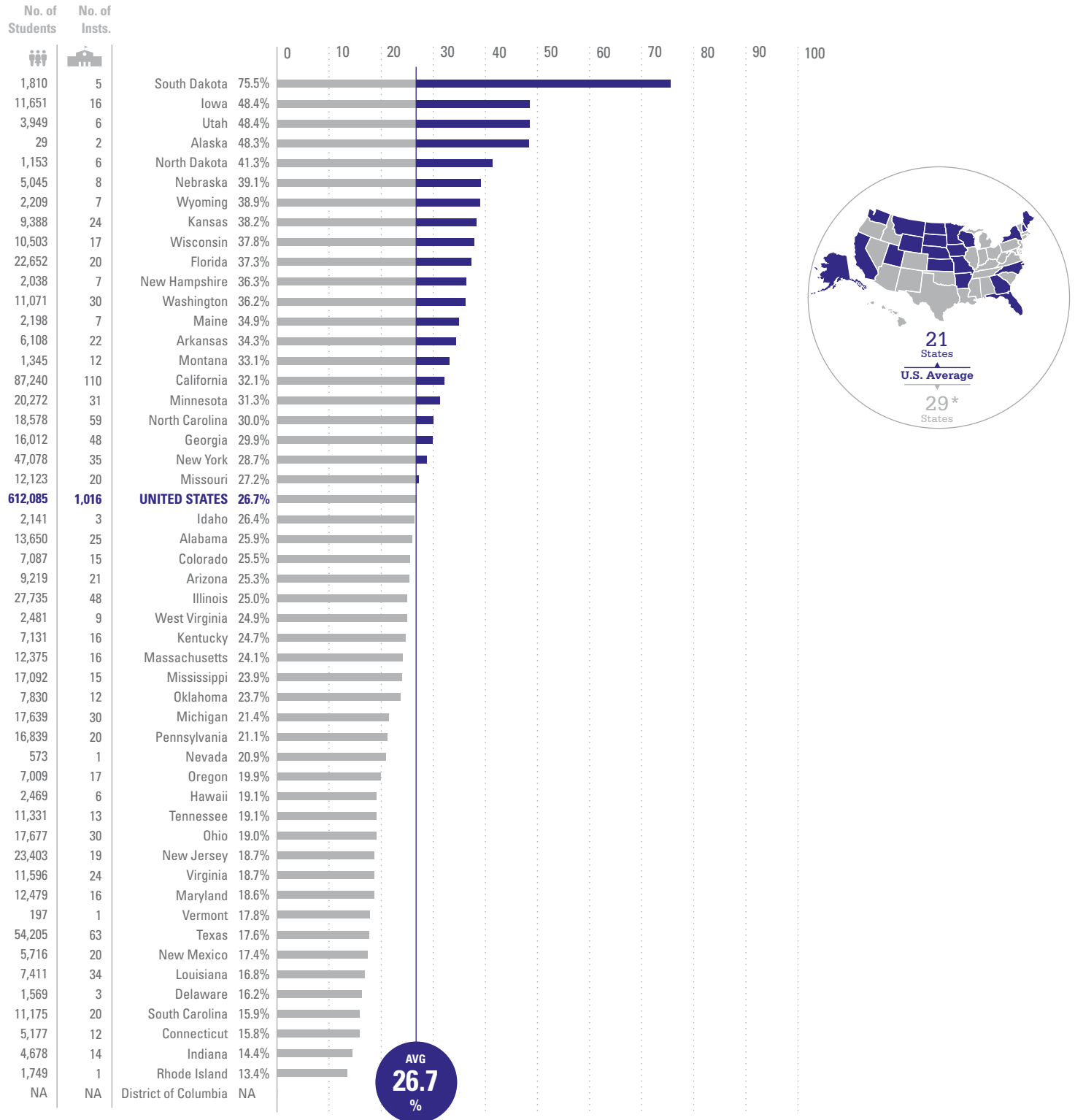
\* Indicator data not available for all states.

9.2n

**Four-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Public Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



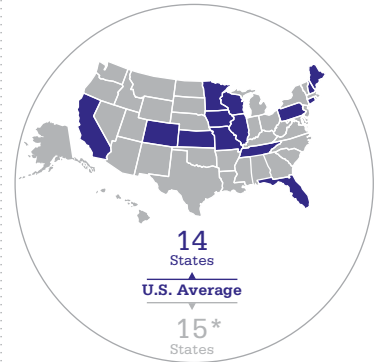
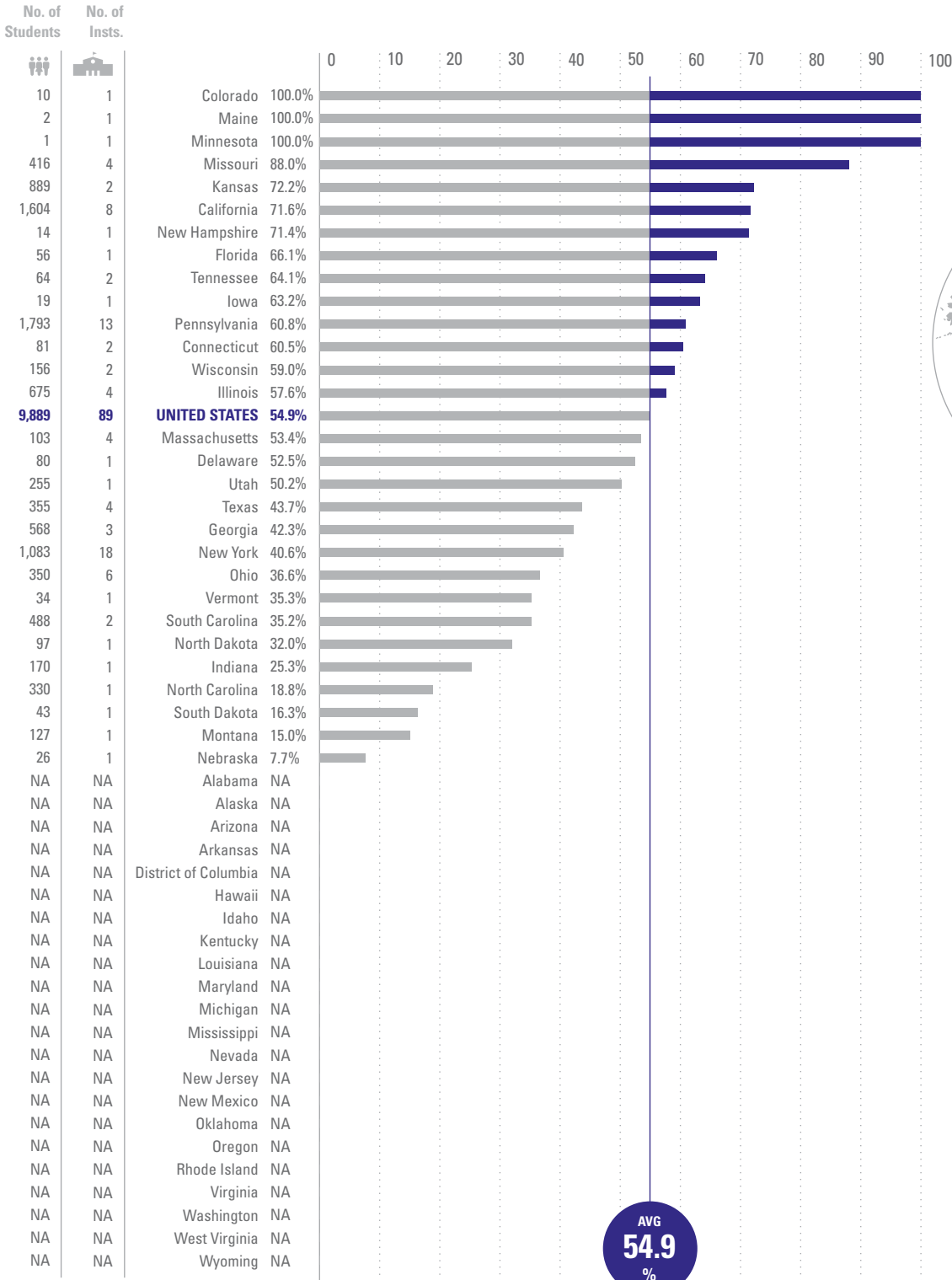
\* Indicator data not available for all states.

9.2o

**Four-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Private Not-for-Profit Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**54.9**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

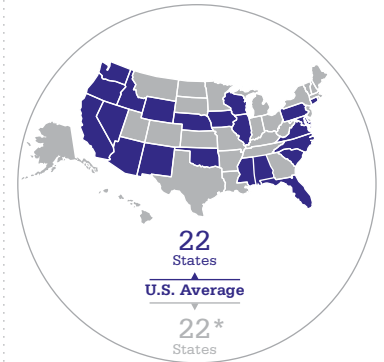
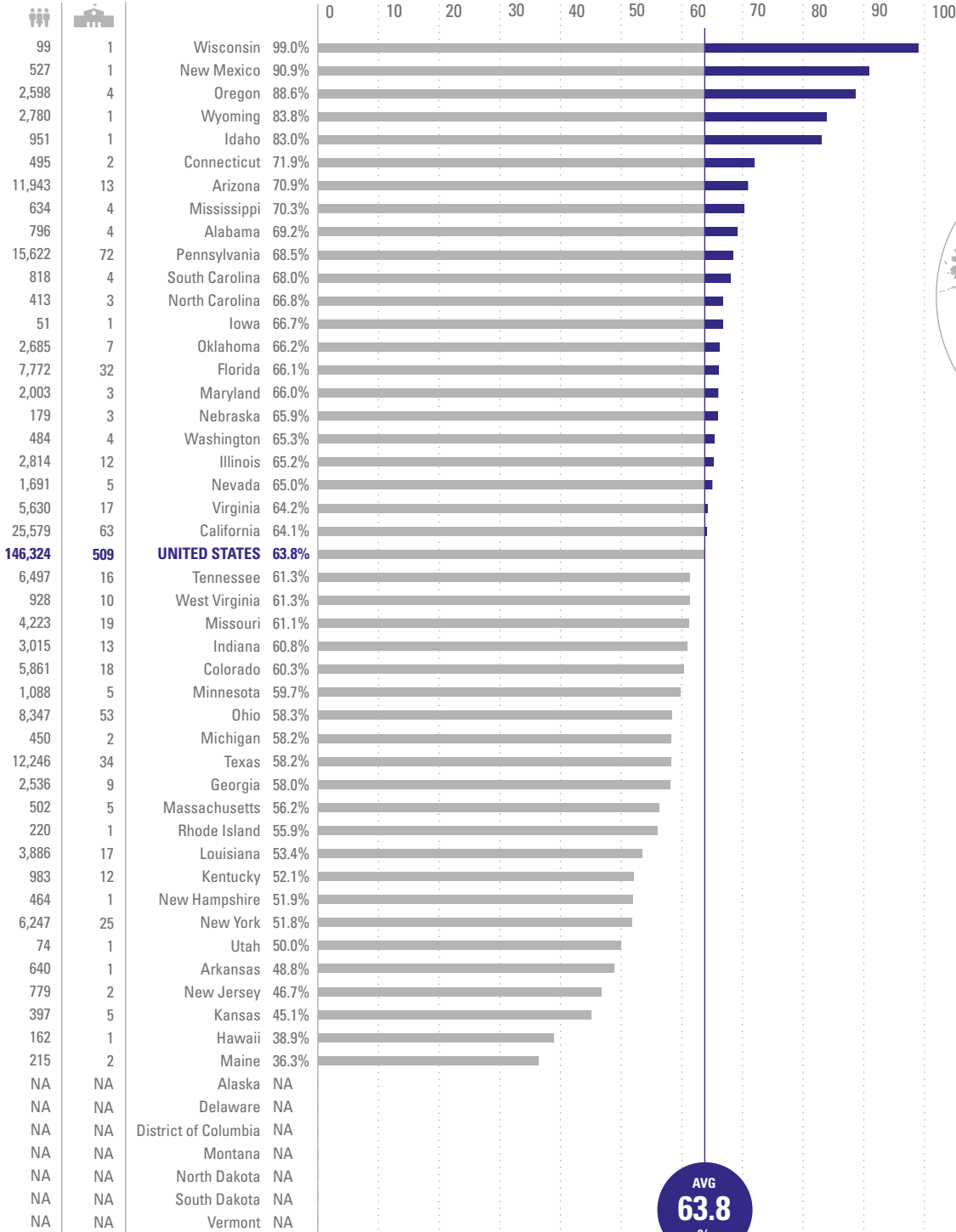
9.2p

**Four-Year Graduation Rates of Degree- and Certificate-Seeking Students at Private For-Profit Two-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008

No. of Students No. of Insts.



AVG  
**63.8**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

# 57.7%

As of 2008, 57.7 percent of full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.

◀▶ 2007–2008

# 38.5%

As of 2008, 38.5 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.

◀▶ 2007–2008

## Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This measure provides a more complete picture of the educational progress of American college students. The majority of data in this indicator reflect the proportion of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students who graduate within 150 percent of normal program length (i.e., six years). In addition, eight-year graduation rates (200 percent of normal program length) are available for the first time and are included in this indicator. Graduation rates are calculated by aggregating, across institutions in a given state and/or sector, the institution-level adjusted entering cohorts and the number of students from these cohorts who graduate within the appropriate time frame. Estimates therefore can be interpreted as a percentage of students in the given sector and/or state.

Traditional graduation rates reflect persistence and degree attainment within the institution in which one originally enrolls. One criticism of this approach is that this does not account for transfer students who go on to earn a degree from an institution other than the one first attended. Recent data from the Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) longitudinal study are included in this indicator in order to address this limitation.

The data are disaggregated by state, race/ethnicity and source of institutional control (i.e., public, private not-for-profit, private for-profit) to help states understand the differential outcomes across groups and to illustrate how the state's overall graduation rate is a function of the varying performance of these students in different types of institutions.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** National and state policymakers are highly attuned to the graduation rate discussion. Individuals, as well as states, invest money in higher education with the expectation of degree completion — a credential that can improve the economic well-being of both the student and the state as a whole. The consequences of failing to complete a degree are of great concern, especially when one considers the growth in average student loan debt and student loan default rates in recent years (see Recommendation Seven for more details).

Graduation rates have been a part of the higher education landscape since Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know Act in 1990. They are the primary national, standardized measure of postsecondary outcomes. However, policymakers should consider the significance and meaning of high or low graduation rates. The appropriate context should be taken into account when considering whether persistence indicators such as graduation rates can or should be used as accountability measures. Institutions vary in their mission as well as the composition of entering students, factors which should be recognized when interpreting estimates, particularly at the institution level. Institutions that aim to educate low-income, first-generation, traditionally

# 40.5%

As of 2008, 40.5 percent of African American full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.

◀▶ 2007–2008

# 49.4%

As of 2008, 49.4 percent of Hispanic full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in six years or less.

▲ 2.6ppts 2007–2008

underserved students will face substantially different enrollment, retention and graduation challenges compared to institutions that attract most of their students from the top of the nation's high school graduating classes. Policymakers should seek to understand the benefits and limitations of graduation rates in order to better serve all constituents.

As discussed in the previous indicator, substantial persistent gaps exist between the graduation rates of Asian and white students and the graduation rates of students in other racial/ethnic groups. There is a tremendous amount of research being done to understand the factors that contribute to these differential outcomes. A complete discussion of this research is beyond the scope of this publication.

**Where are we now?** As of 2008, 57.7 percent of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students in the nation's four-year colleges graduate within six years (Figure 9.3a). This estimate increased slightly from a low of 55.5 percent in 2002. Graduation rates vary by sector, such that 55.3 percent of bachelor's degree-seeking students in public four-year colleges graduate within six years, compared to 65.1 percent and 23.5 percent at private not-for-profit and for-profit four-year colleges, respectively. Public institutions account for just under two-thirds of first-time, full-time students at four-year colleges. Private not-for-profit institutions constitute approximately one-third of enrollment, while private for-profit institutions reflect only 2 to 3 percent of four-year college freshmen enrollment.

Six-year graduation rates of first-time, full-time students at four-year colleges vary by race/ethnicity and sector (Figure 9.3b). Asian students at four-year colleges have the highest six-year graduation rate (67.5 percent), followed by white students (60.7 percent), Hispanic students (49.4 percent), African American students (40.5 percent) and American Indian students (38.5 percent). Six-year graduation rates are highest in the private not-for-profit sector, a finding which is consistent across racial/ethnic groups.

Similar findings emerge from the Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) longitudinal survey data (Figure 9.3c), such that just over half (50.5 percent) of students who enter a four-year college graduate within six years. Graduation rates are substantially higher among public and private not-for-profit institutions compared to private for-profit colleges. BPS data also provide insight into the impact of transferring across institutions. Six-year graduation rates are somewhat higher when taking into account whether the student graduates from any institution (58.0 percent), as opposed to just looking at the original institution (50.5 percent) in which the student is enrolled (Figure 9.3c).

When disaggregated by state, the six-year graduation rate at four-year colleges ranges from 25.5 percent in Alaska to 73.2 percent in the District of Columbia (Figure 9.3d). States such as Connecticut, District of Columbia, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah and Vermont are impacted largely, and positively, by the private

# 60.6%

As of 2008, 60.6 percent of full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at four-year colleges graduate in eight years or less.

not-for-profit sector (Figure 9.3f). Private for-profit institutions account for over four of every 10 first-time, full-time students in Arizona, thus the overall six-year graduation rate in this state is influenced greatly by this sector (Figure 9.3g). Graduation rates also vary by race/ethnicity and sector (Figures 9.3h–9.3l).

When six-year graduation rates are compared against eight-year graduation rates, it is clear that the additional time affords a number of students the opportunity to complete their degrees. For example, while 57.7 percent of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students who entered in fall 2000 earn a bachelor's degree in six years (Figure 9.3a), 60.6 percent of this same cohort graduate within eight years (Figure 9.3m). When disaggregated by state, the eight-year graduation rate ranges from 30.6 percent in Alaska to 75.4 percent in the District of Columbia (Figure 9.3n).

### **When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?**

The limitations of these graduation rates deserve consideration. For example, as was the case with the previous indicator, graduation rates are based solely on degree completion within the institution in which one enrolls as a full-time, first-time student. In addition, they do not reflect part-time students, students who begin college in terms other than the fall term, or incoming transfer students who go on to successfully complete a degree. In fact, successful transfer students count against the original institution's graduation rate (which also influences estimates at the state level) and do nothing to benefit the receiving institution. Many policymakers and researchers have called for reforms to standardize the way that transfer rates are measured and reported by states and institutions. Because of the lack of the standardization of transfer rates, these data are not yet available to help contextualize the nation's success in increasing completion rates.

It is also important to consider that graduation rates are associated with many other factors not directly addressed in these data (e.g., first-generation status, academic preparation, socioeconomic background, adjustment to college, etc.). In addition, many students take longer than the traditional four- to six-year window to graduate, including students who begin as full-time students but spend most of their undergraduate experience attending part time and students who work while attending college. The inclusion of BPS estimates and eight-year graduation rates in this report is meant to address some of these limitations and provide a more complete picture of degree completion.

Recent changes in the rules regarding maintenance, collection, and reporting of federal data on race and ethnicity should be considered when interpreting data in this indicator. Institutions must now collect these data using a two-question format in which the first assesses whether the individual is Hispanic/Latino (ethnicity) and the second evaluates whether the respondent is one or more of the following races: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or white. In addition, Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were separated into two categories and a reporting category "two or more races" was introduced.

In the most recent graduation survey, institutions had the option to report under old or new race/ethnicity categories. IPEDS then derived a total, where the new category overlapped with the old. The data contained in this indicator reflect these derived categories. It is possible that the addition of “two or more races” in the new system changes how institutions report students, which raises questions about the ability to compare estimates from the 2008 survey to those from previous or future years (when institutions will have fully transitioned to the new system).

Finally, some estimates are based on a very small number of students, particularly when disaggregated by state by sector by ethnicity. Readers are advised to consider the number of institutions behind various estimates as well as the number of students that underlie these estimates. In some cases, institutional responses are altered by NCEs to protect the privacy of students. Thus, the publicly available survey data may not reflect the exact value reported by institutions. The impact of this likely varies across figures within this indicator. For example, there is likely a greater impact on American Indian or Alaska Native estimates than there is for white students, since a greater number of institutional responses regarding American Indian or Alaska Natives may have been altered by NCEs. Similarly, estimates based on the cumulative responses of many small colleges may be impacted more than those based on the cumulative responses of larger colleges.

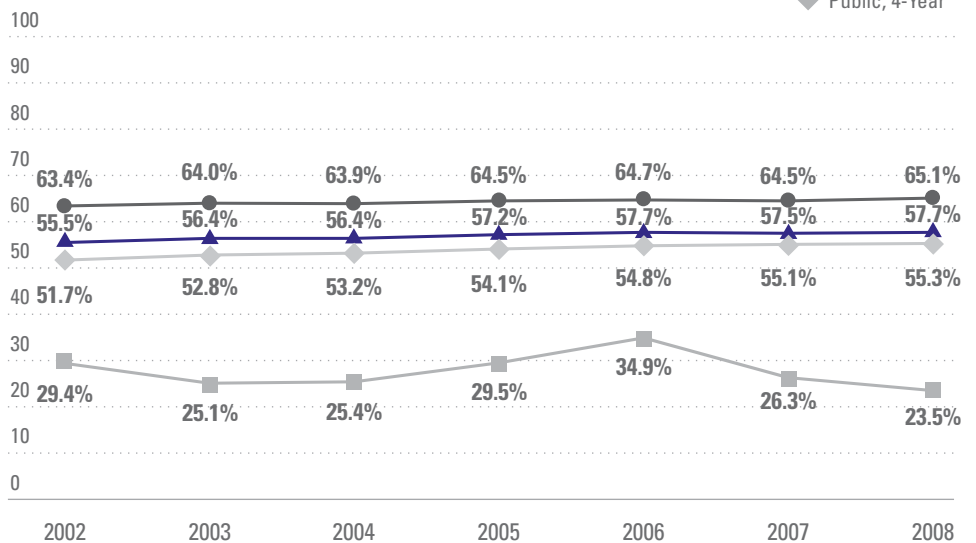
9.3a

**National Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students, 2002–2008**

Source: NCEs IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008


New figure +

- ▲ Total, 4-Year
- Private, 4-Year (Not-for-Profit)
- Private, 4-Year (For-Profit)
- ◆ Public, 4-Year

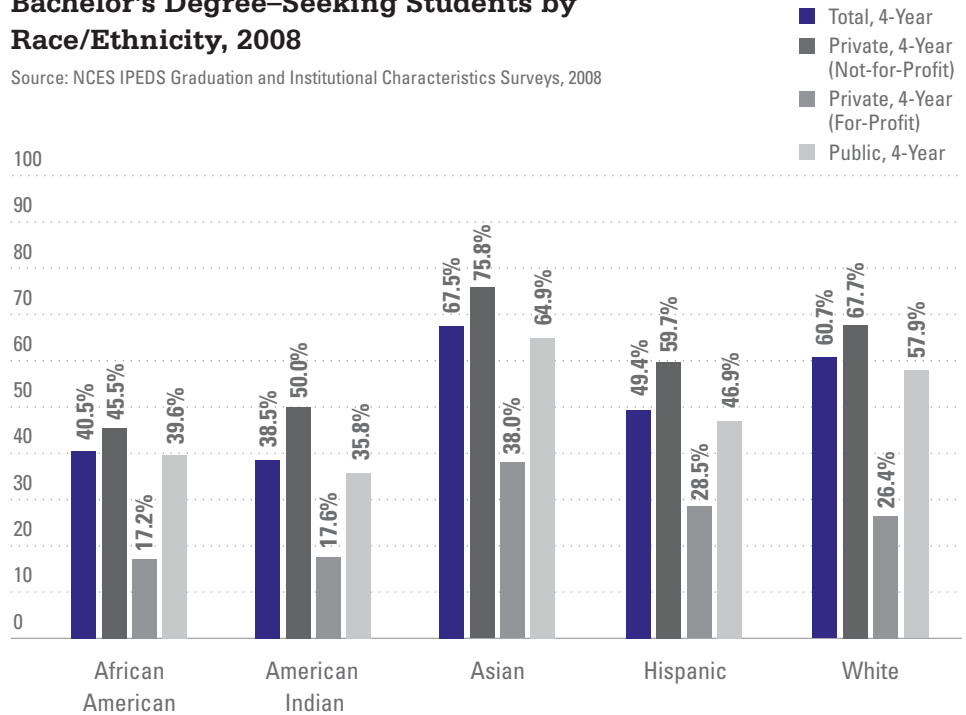


9.3b

**National Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students by Race/Ethnicity, 2008**

Updated data source 

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008

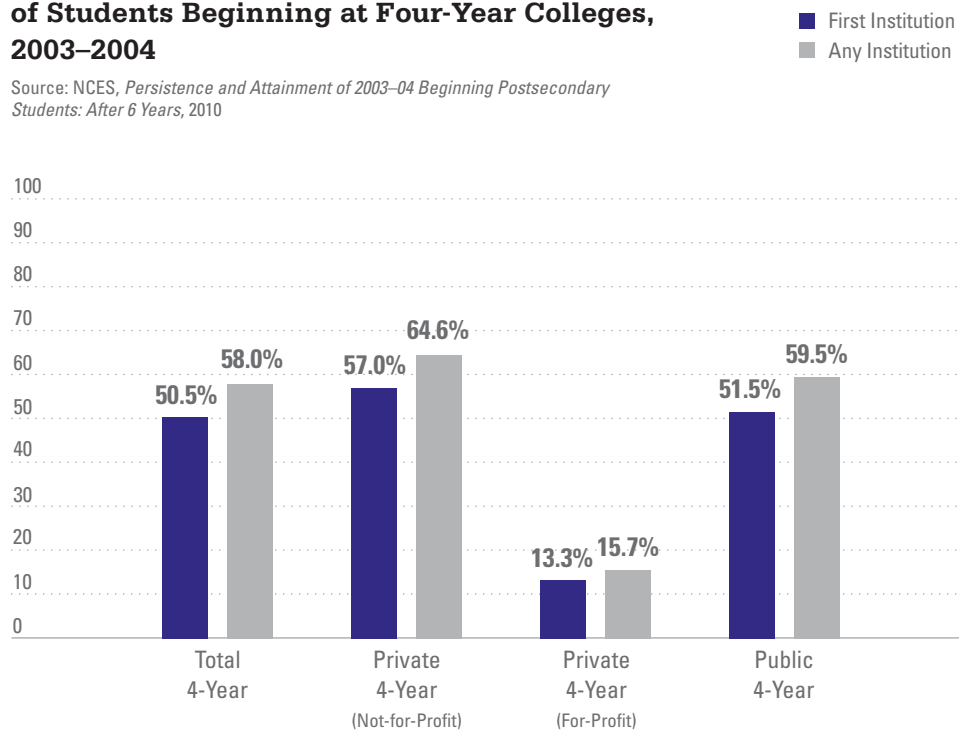


9.3c

**Six-Year Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rates of Students Beginning at Four-Year Colleges, 2003-2004**

New figure 

Source: NCES, *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years*, 2010



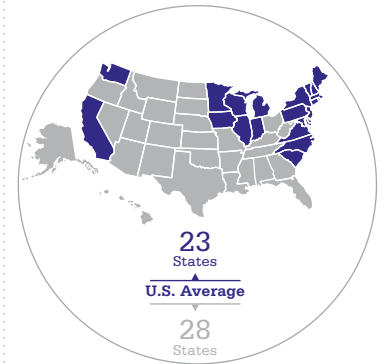
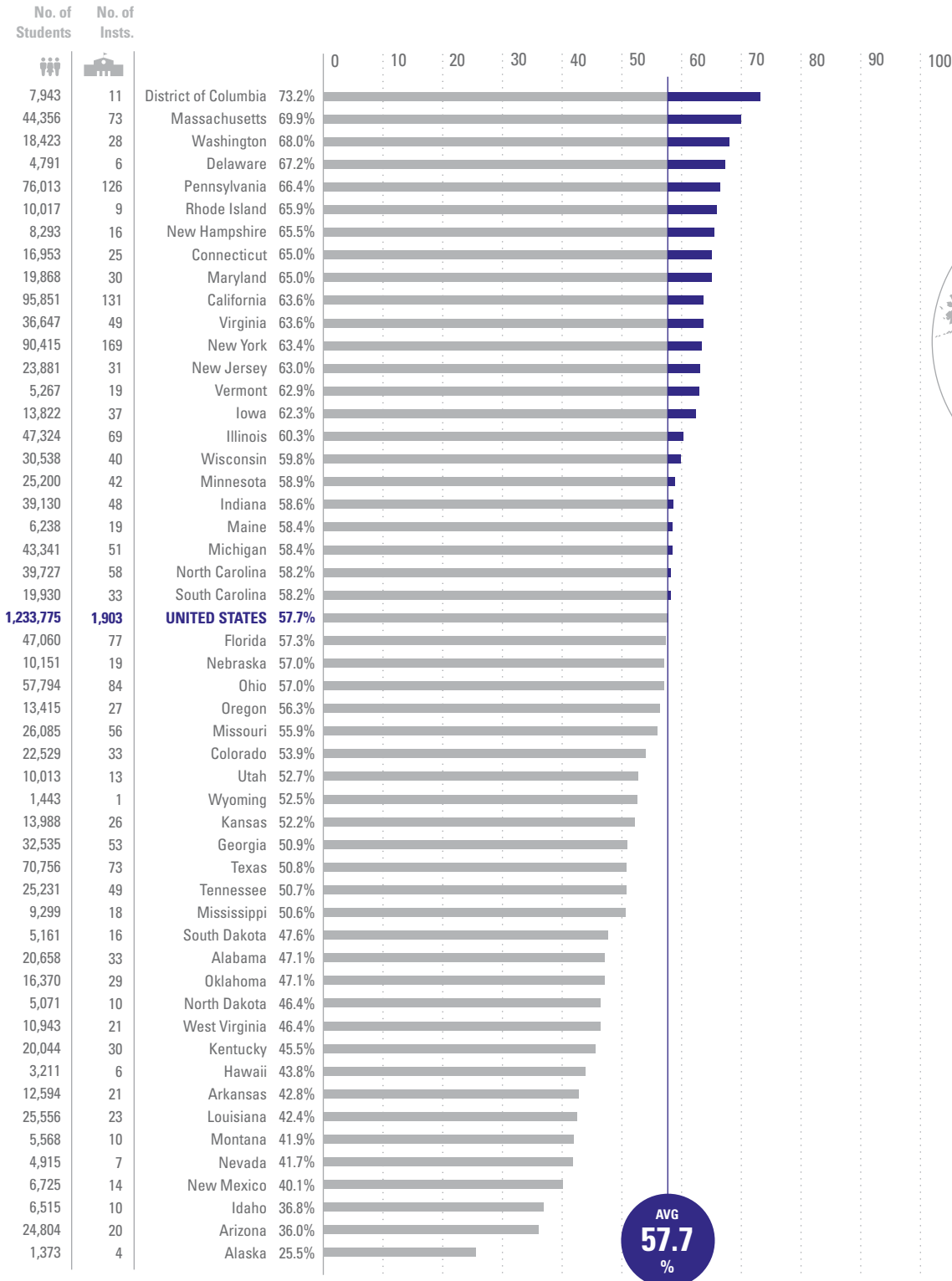
9.3d

**Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



**AVG**  
**57.7**  
**%**

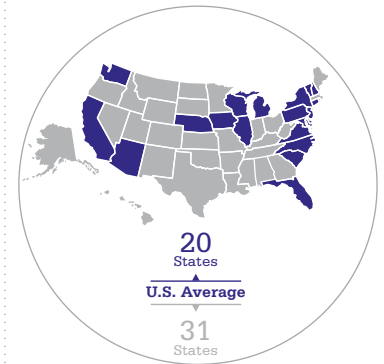
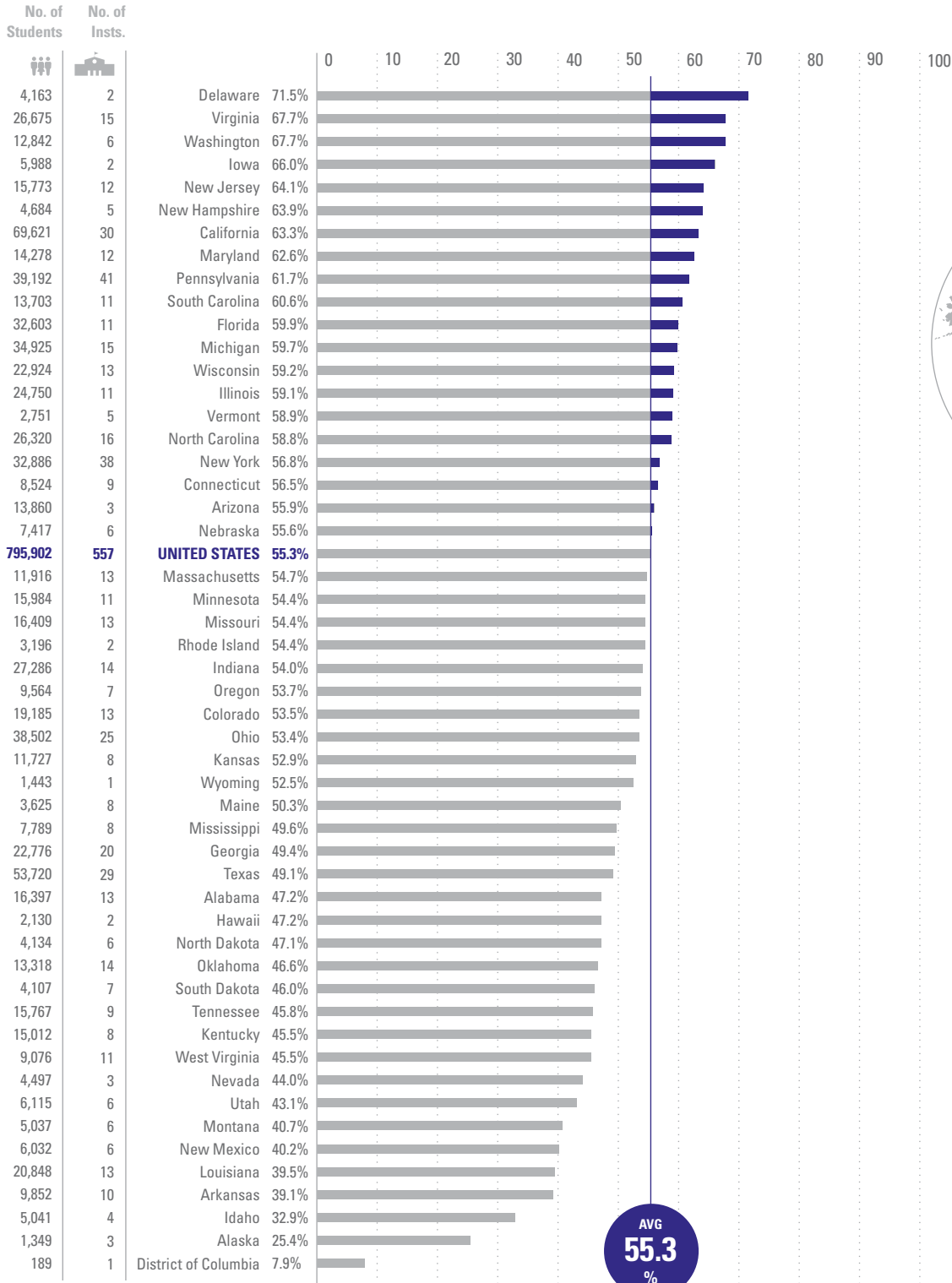
9.3e

### Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Public Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008

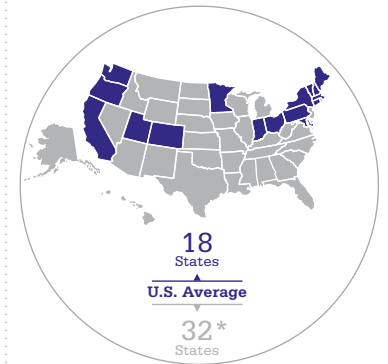
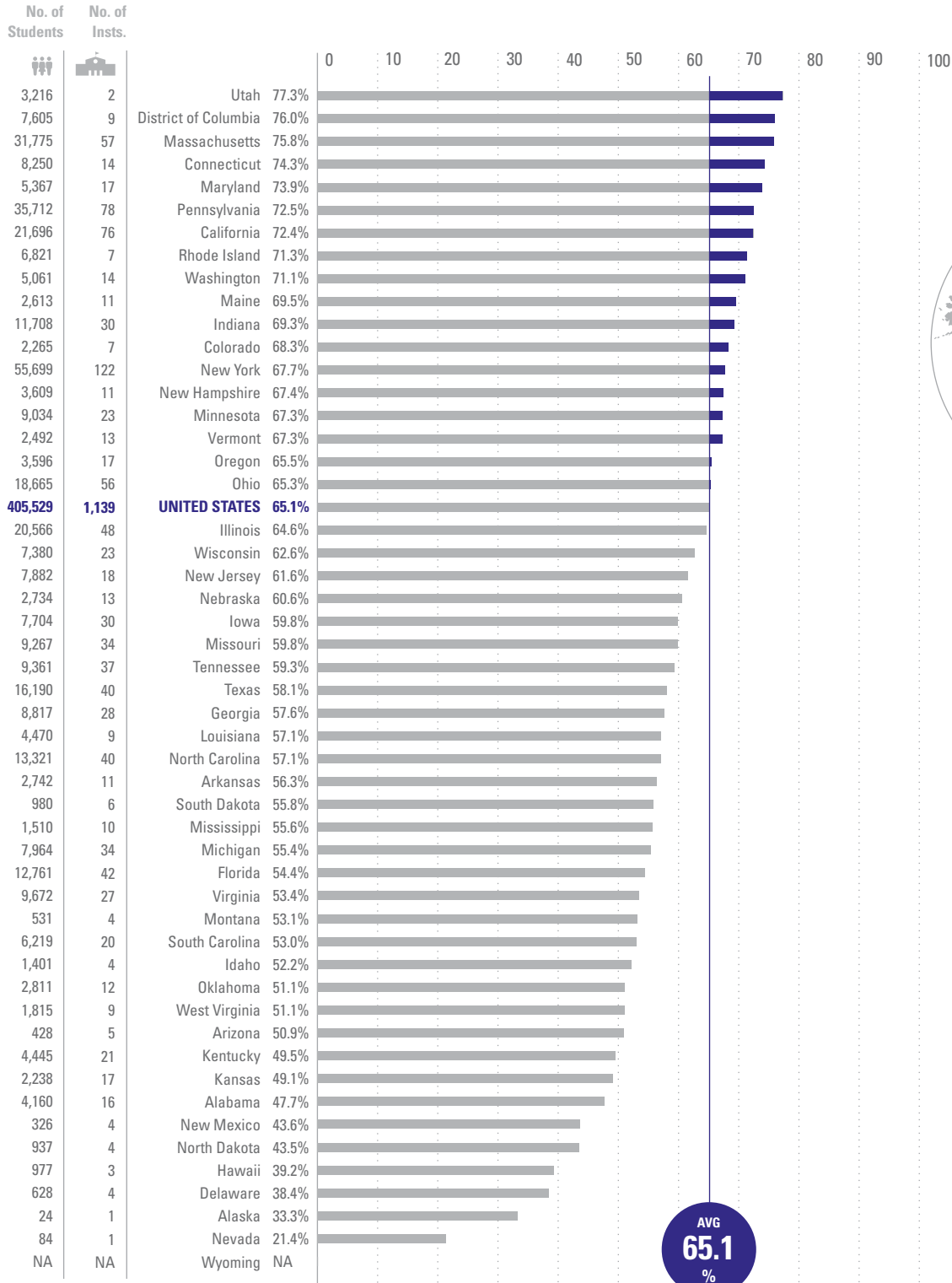


AVG  
**55.3**  
%

9.3f

**Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Private Not-for-Profit Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**65.1**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

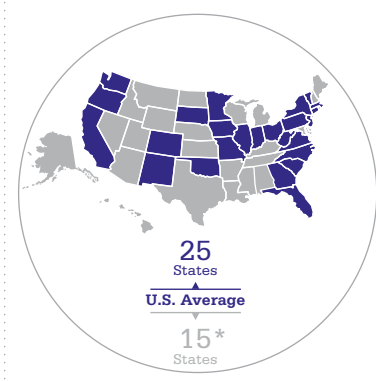
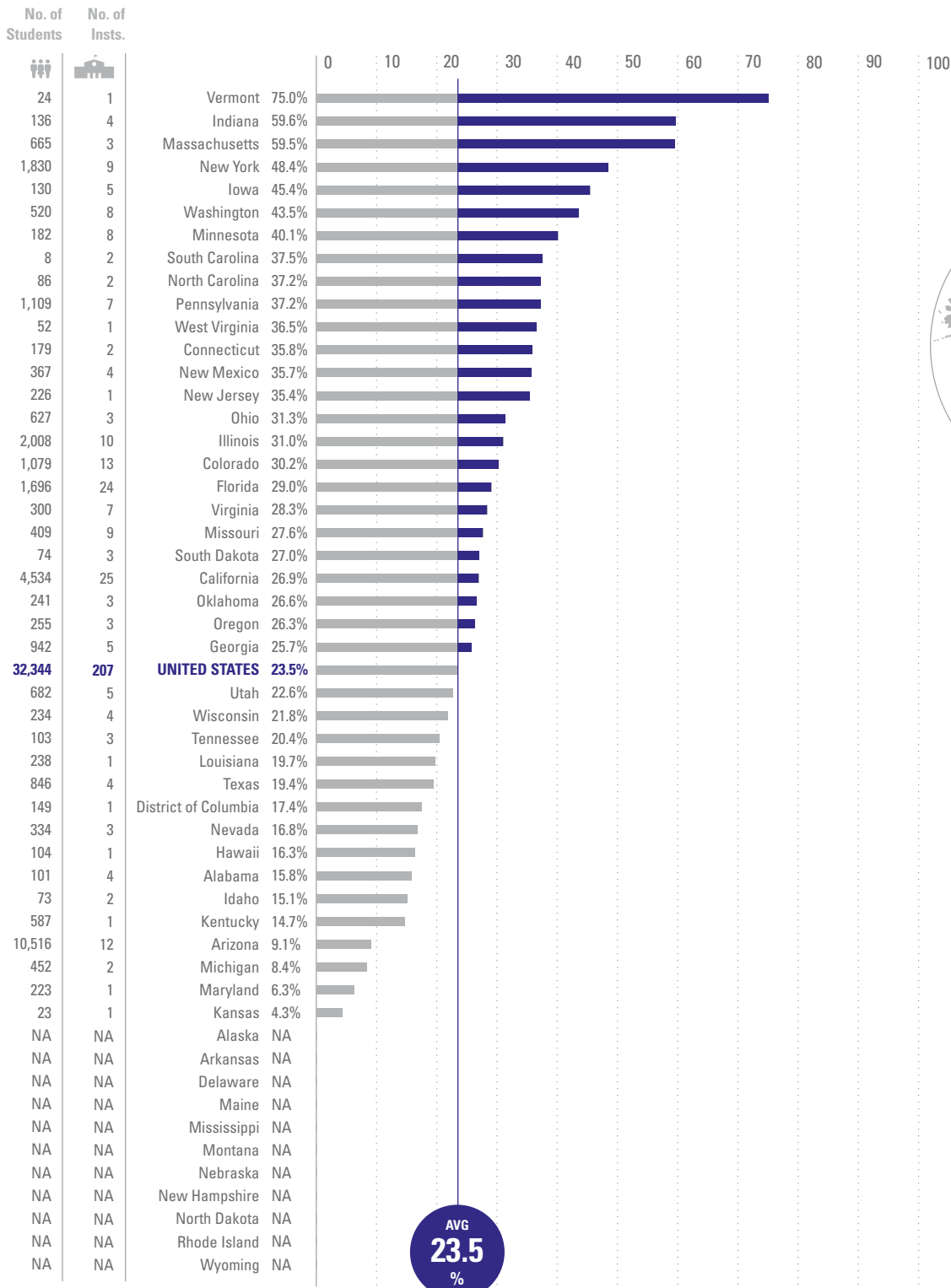
9.3g

**Six-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Private For-Profit Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008




AVG  
**23.5**  
%

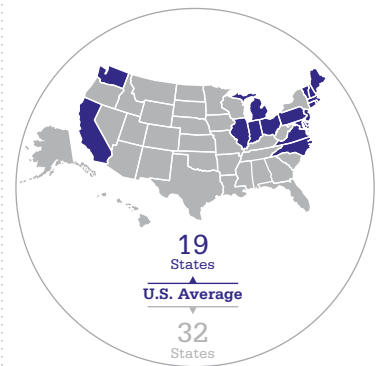
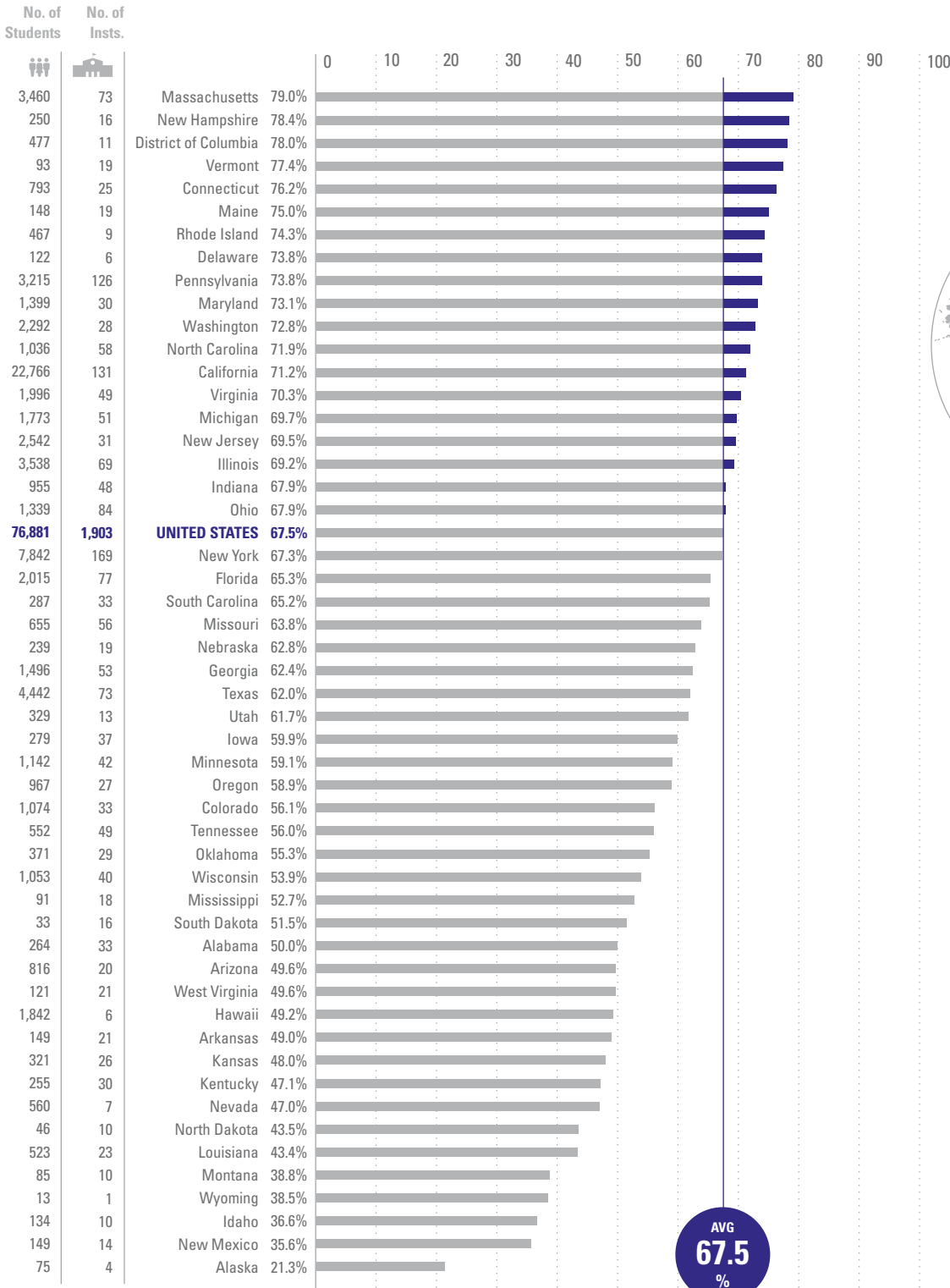
\* Indicator data not available for all states.

9.3h

### Six-Year Graduation Rates of Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source 

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**67.5**  
%

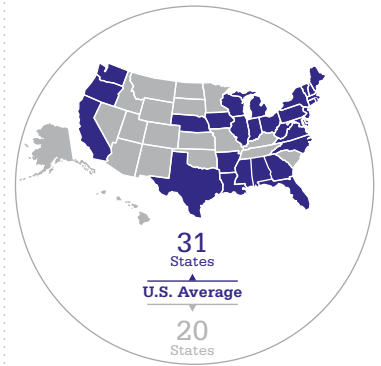
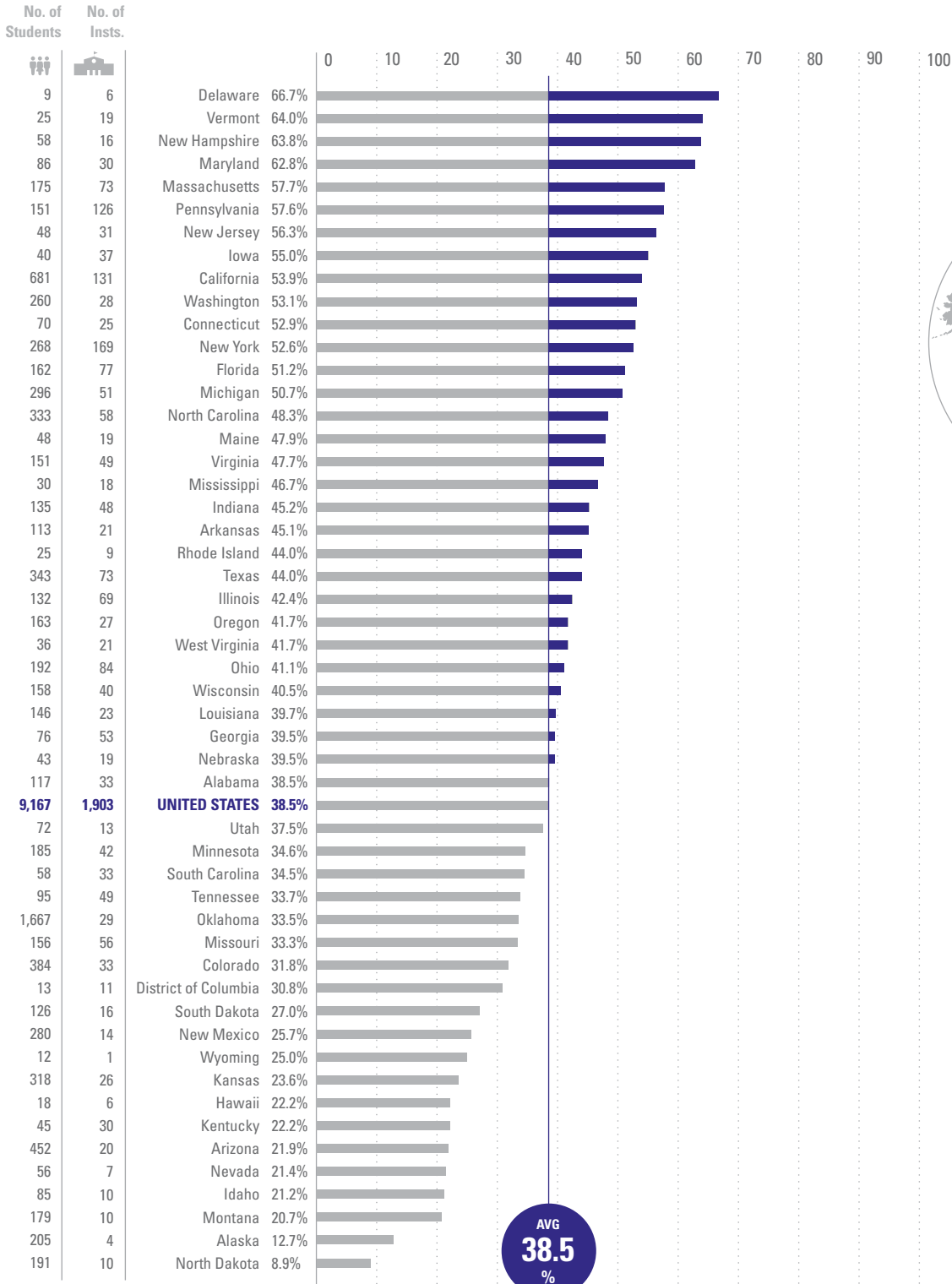
9.3i

### Six-Year Graduation Rates of American Indian or Alaska Native Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



**AVG**  
**38.5**  
**%**

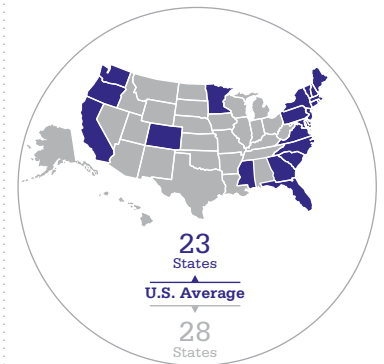
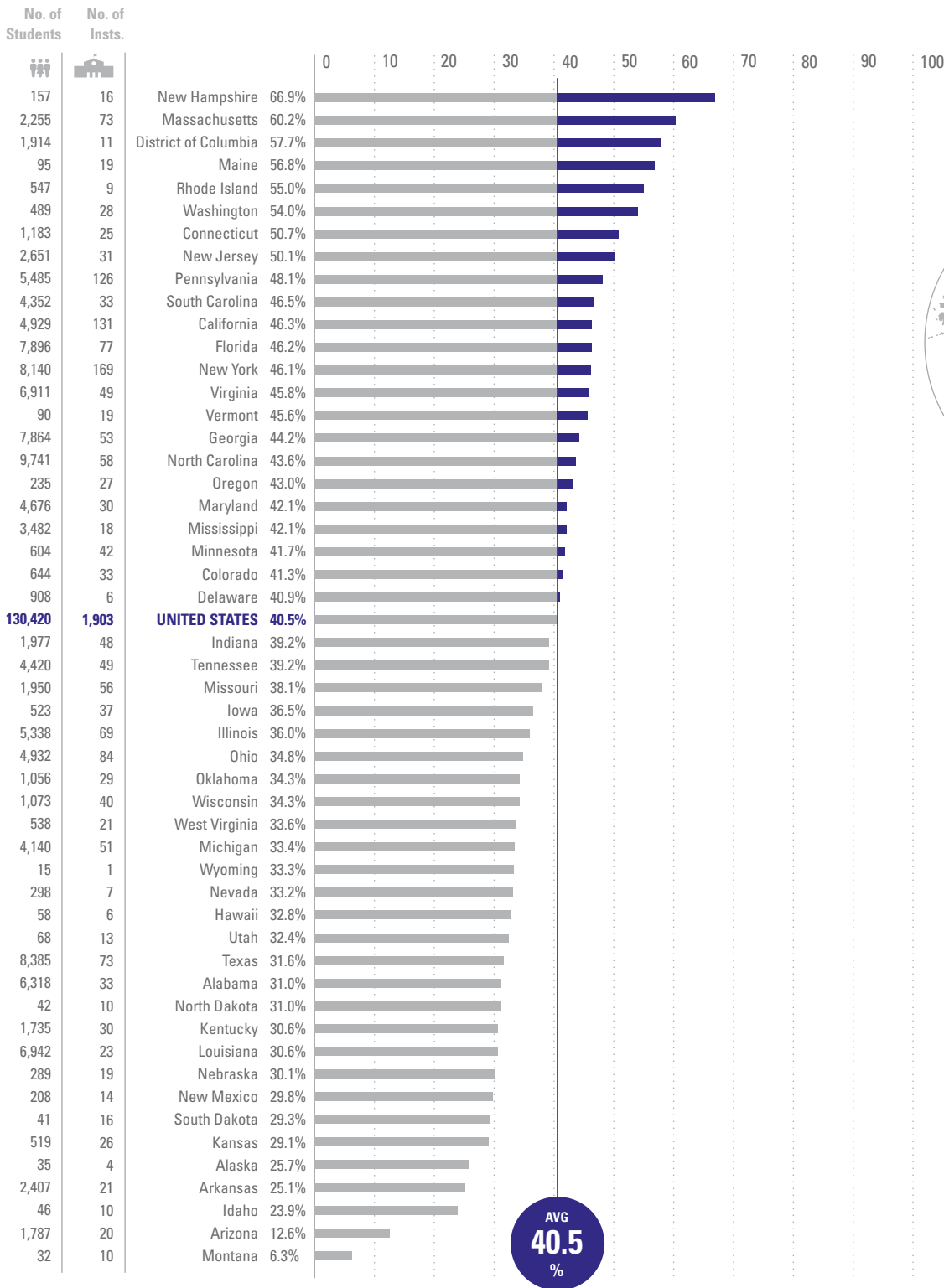
9.3j

### Six-Year Graduation Rates of Black or African American Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**40.5**  
%

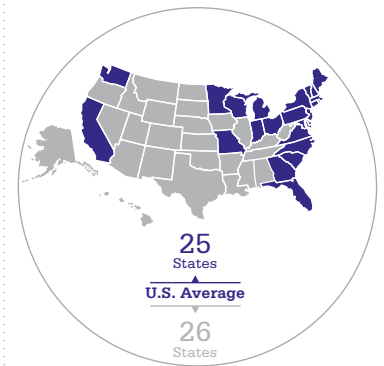
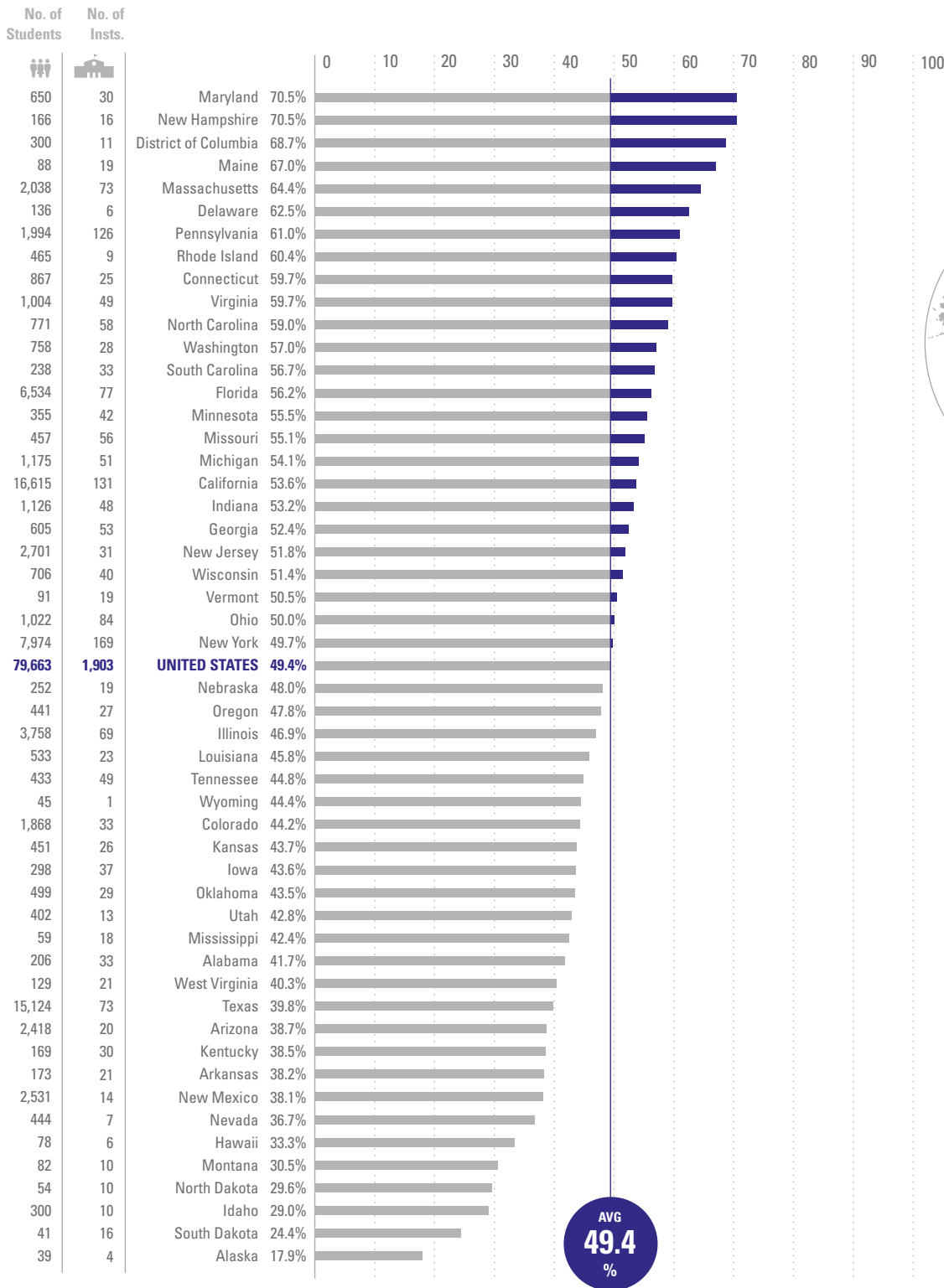
9.3k

### Six-Year Graduation Rates of Hispanic or Latino Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**49.4**  
%

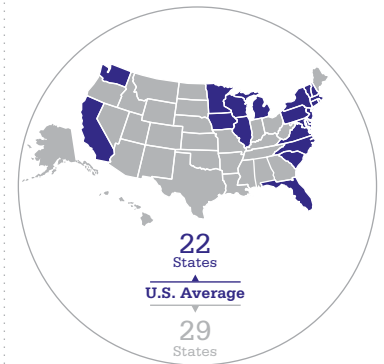
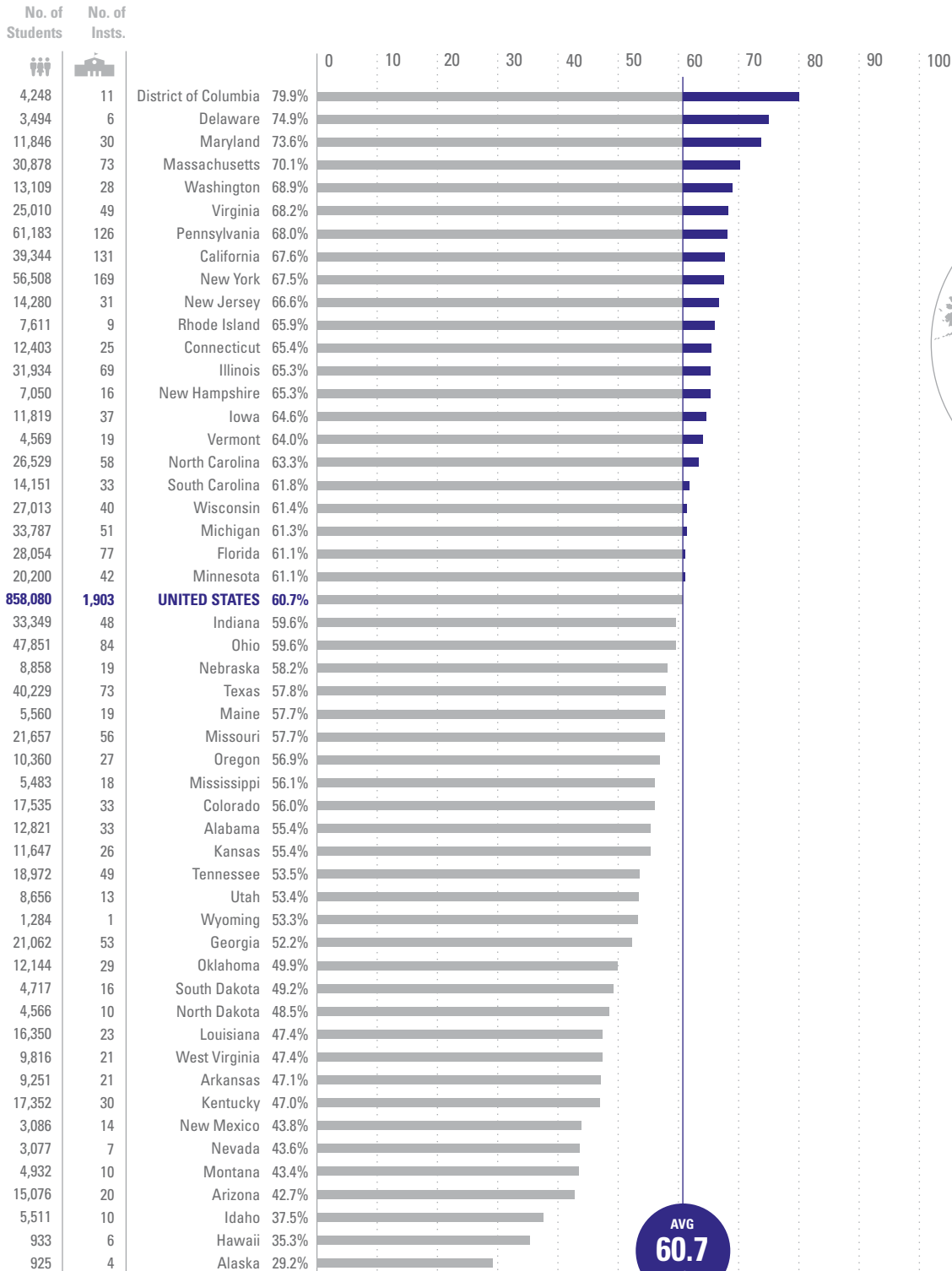
9.31

**Six-Year Graduation Rates of White Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

Updated data source



Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



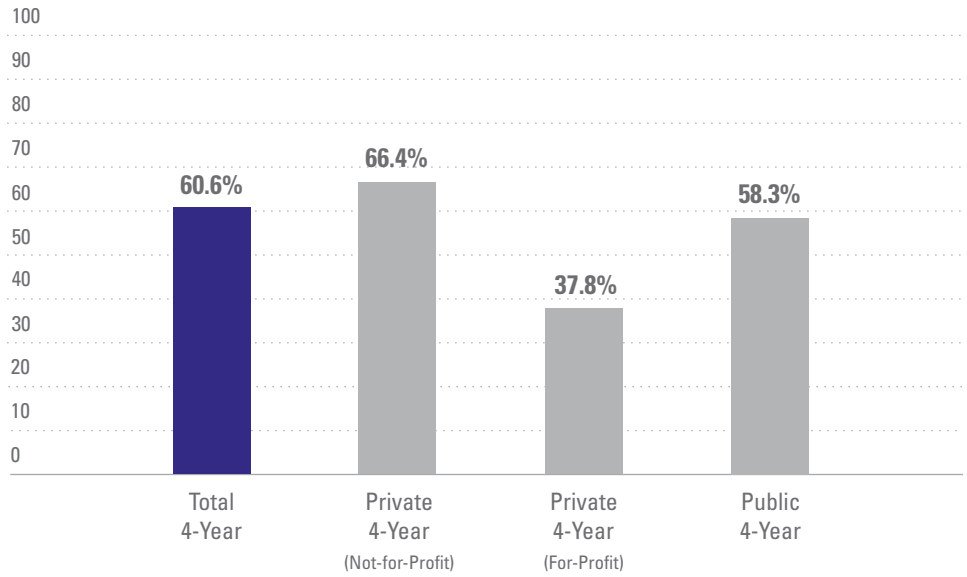
AVG  
**60.7**  
%

9.3m

### National Eight-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students, 2008

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008

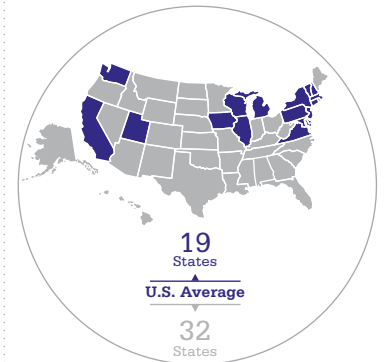
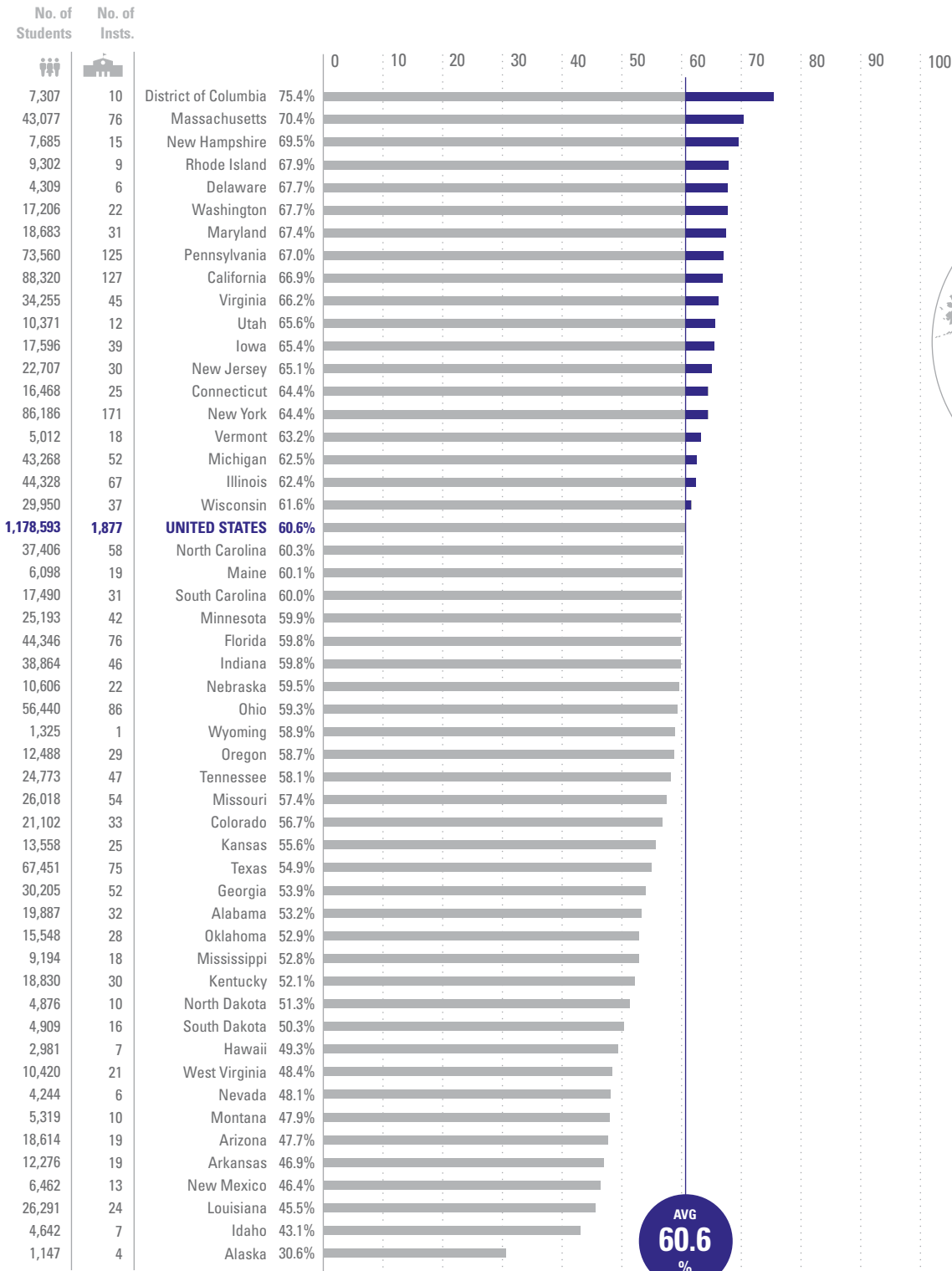


9.3n

### Eight-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



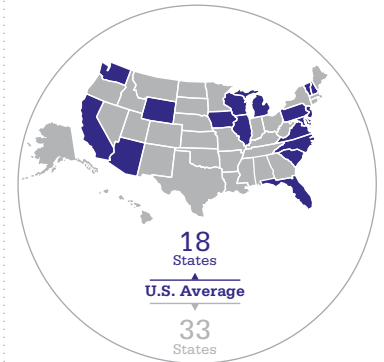
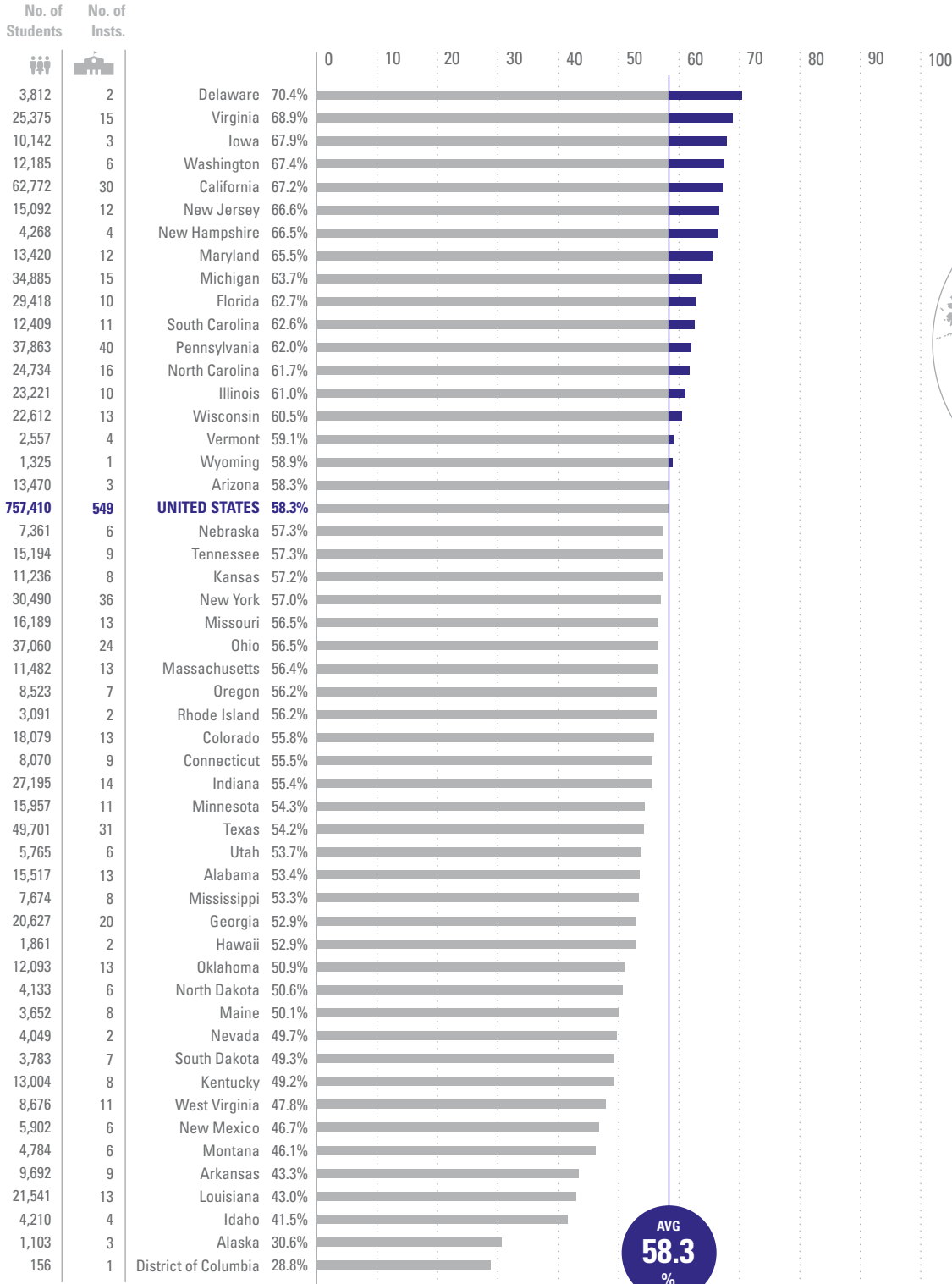
AVG  
**60.6**  
%

9.3o

**Eight-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Public Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



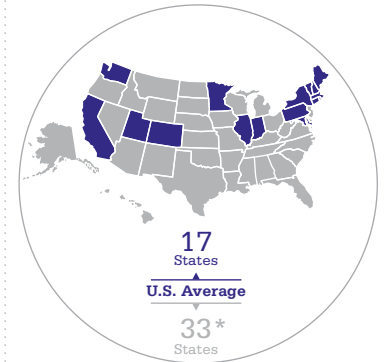
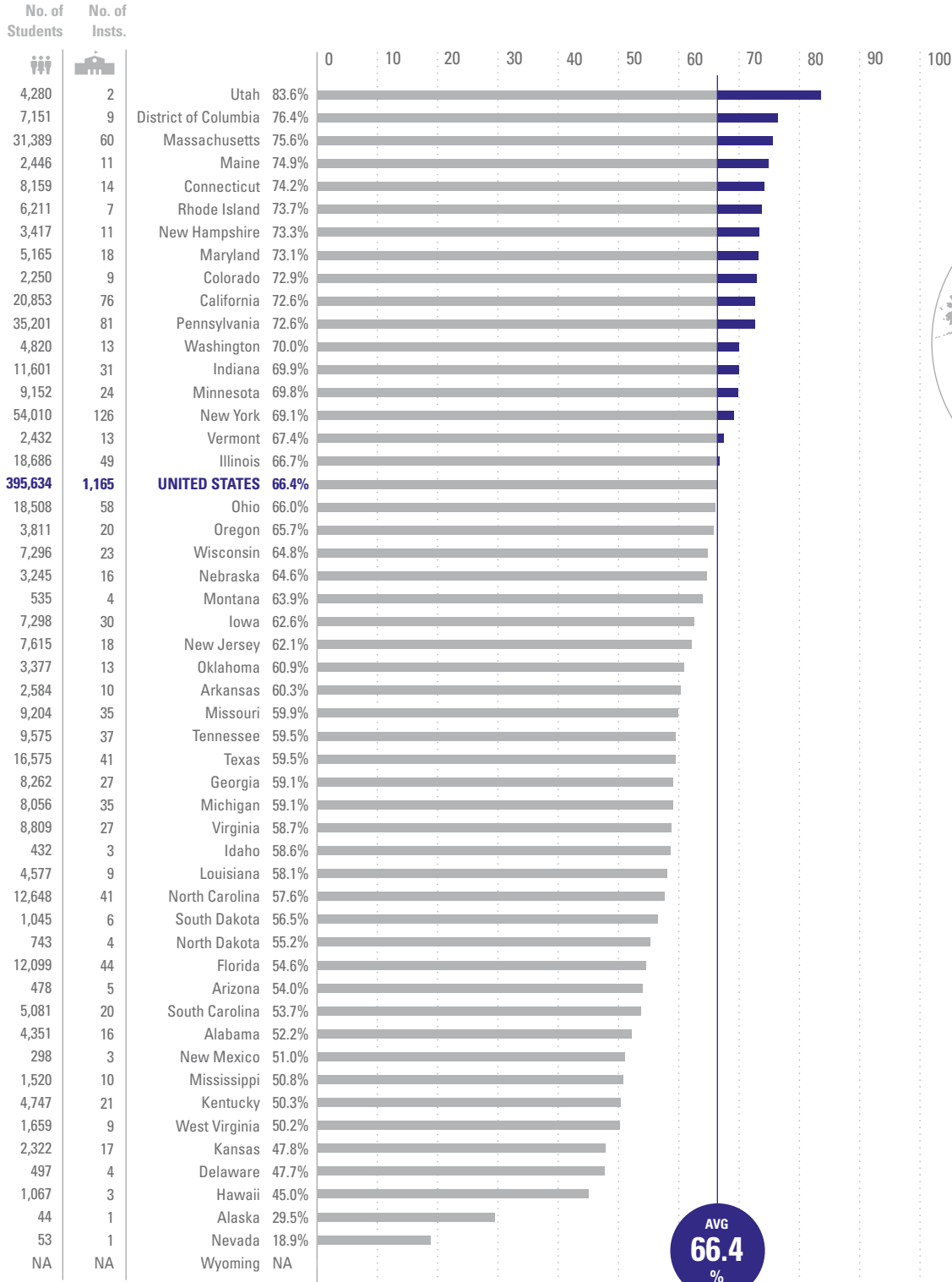
AVG  
**58.3**  
%

9.3p

**Eight-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Private Not-for-Profit Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**66.4**  
%

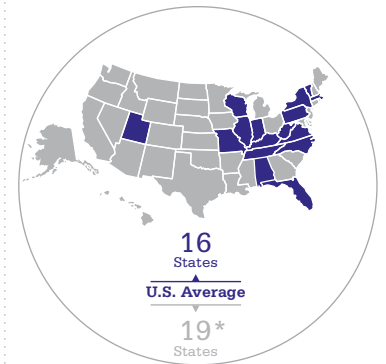
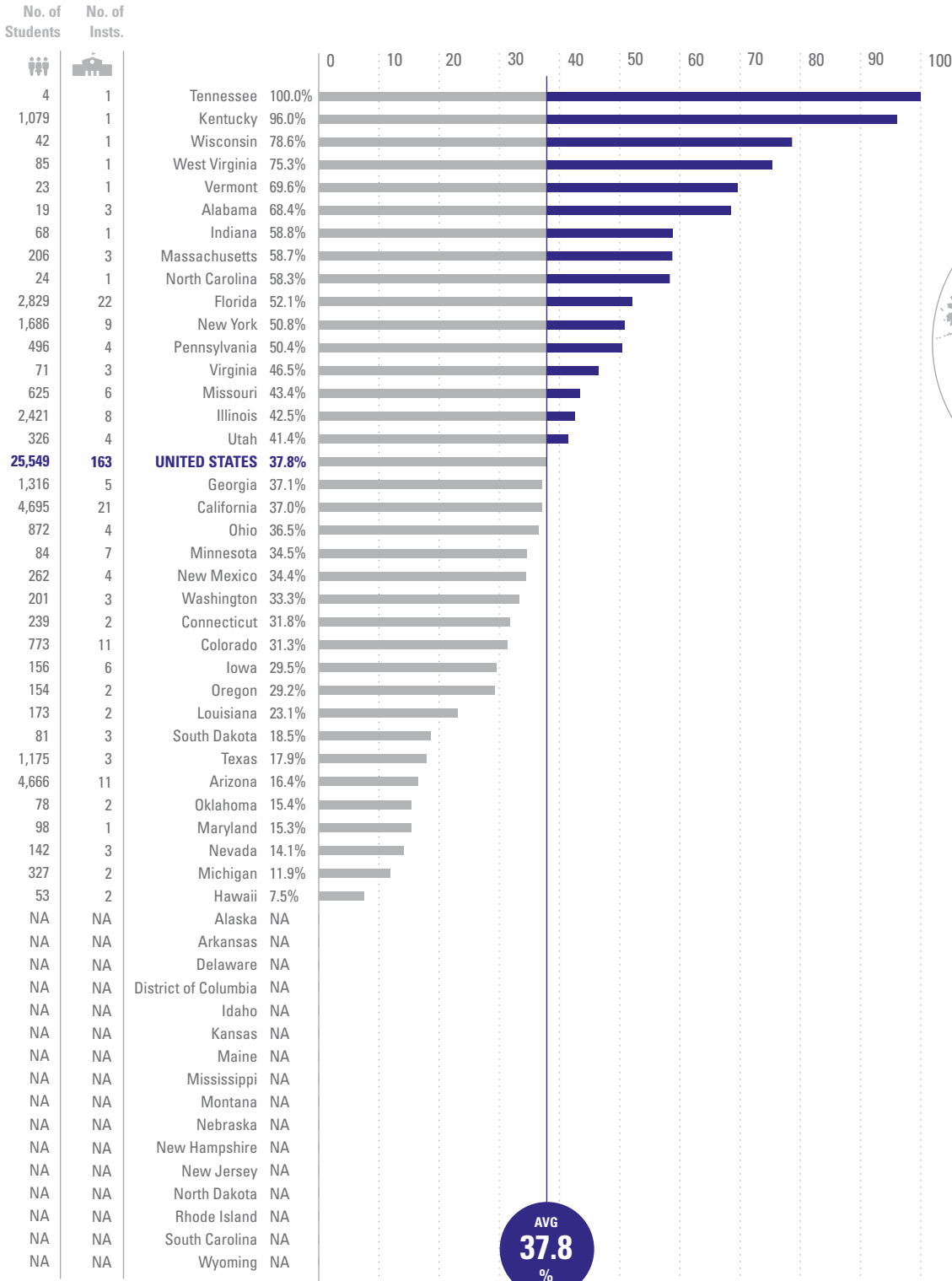
\* Indicator data not available for all states.

9.3q

**Eight-Year Graduation Rates of Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students at Private For-Profit Four-Year Colleges by State Rank, 2008**

New figure +

Source: NCES IPEDS Graduation 200 and Institutional Characteristics Surveys, 2008



AVG  
**37.8**  
%

\* Indicator data not available for all states.

# 36.0%

As of 2009, the number of associate degrees has increased 36.0 percent from 1,159,550 in 2001 to 1,577,136 in 2009.

# 29.6%

As of 2009, the number of bachelor's degrees has increased 29.6 percent from 2,597,018 in 2001 to 3,366,858 in 2009.

# 1.1%

As of 2009, 1.1 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives.

## Degrees Awarded at Colleges and Universities

**What is this measure, and why is this measure important?** This indicator measures the number of degrees that are awarded in the United States each year by degree type, sector, field, race/ethnicity, gender and state. This measure is important because it shows the actual production of degrees by colleges and universities in the United States.

**What are the policy issues associated with this measure?** Unlike graduation rates, this measure includes those who earn degrees who do not graduate in a specified amount of time (e.g., 150 percent of time) and those graduates who attend school part time and those who transfer from another institution. These students are not currently included in graduation rates, and national data systems do not yet exist to adequately track students across all institutions in the United States.

**Where are we now?** As of 2009, the number of associate degrees has increased 36.0 percent from 1,159,550 in 2001 to 1,577,136 in 2009, and the number of bachelor's degrees has increased 29.6 percent from 2,597,018 in 2001 to 3,366,858 in 2009 (Figure 9.4a).

Figure 9.4b shows degrees by institutional type. While 72.8 percent of all associate degrees are awarded at two-year institutions, four-year institutions awarded 27.2 percent of associate degrees. Almost all bachelor's degrees were awarded at four-year institutions.

There is considerable variability by race/ethnicity. Figure 9.4c shows that 1.1 percent of associate degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives; 5.3 percent of associate degrees are awarded to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; 13.1 percent of associate degrees are awarded to African Americans, and 12.7 percent of associate degrees are awarded to Hispanics. These numbers are compared to 67.8 percent of associate degrees awarded to white students.

Figure 9.4c also shows that 0.8 percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives; 7.3 percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; 9.8 percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to African Americans and 8.3 percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to Hispanics. These numbers are compared to 73.8 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded to white students.

# 13.1%

As of 2009, 13.1 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to African Americans.

# 12.7%

As of 2009, 12.7 percent of all associate degrees are awarded to Hispanics.

# 0.8%

As of 2009, 0.8 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to American Indians or Alaska Natives.

The majority of degrees are awarded to females, including 62.1 percent of all associate degrees and 57.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees (Figure 9.4d). The distribution of all degrees also varies by field (Figure 9.4e). As of 2009, 19.6 percent of all degrees are awarded in business, management and marketing; 17.7 percent of all degrees are awarded in the health professions and clinical sciences; 9.5 percent of all degrees are awarded in education and 3.3 percent of all degrees are awarded in engineering.

The number of degrees awarded varies by degree type and by state (Figures 9.4e-j). The top states that produce associate degrees are California, Florida, New York, Texas and Arizona. The top states that produce bachelor's degrees are California, New York, Texas, Pennsylvania and Florida.

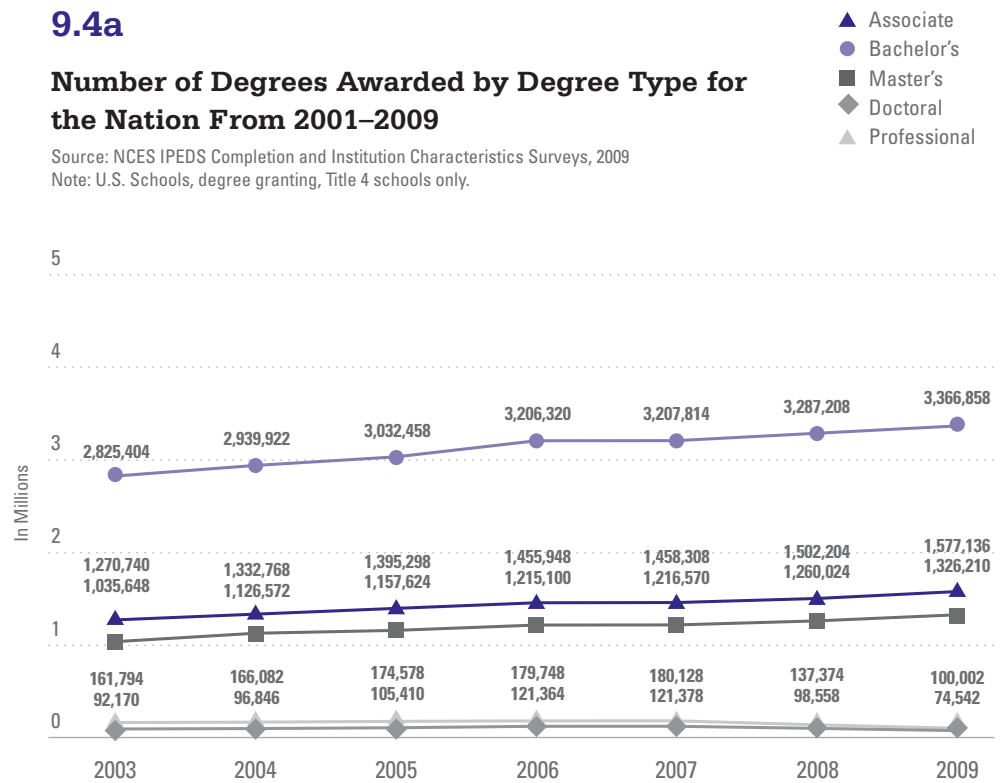
### When interpreting this measure, what should be kept in mind?

While degrees awarded to students do include both transfer students and part-time students, it is not a measure of time to degree or efficiency of money spent for the student to obtain the degree.

## 9.4a

### Number of Degrees Awarded by Degree Type for the Nation From 2001–2009

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009  
 Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.



# 9.8%

As of 2009, 9.8 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to African Americans.

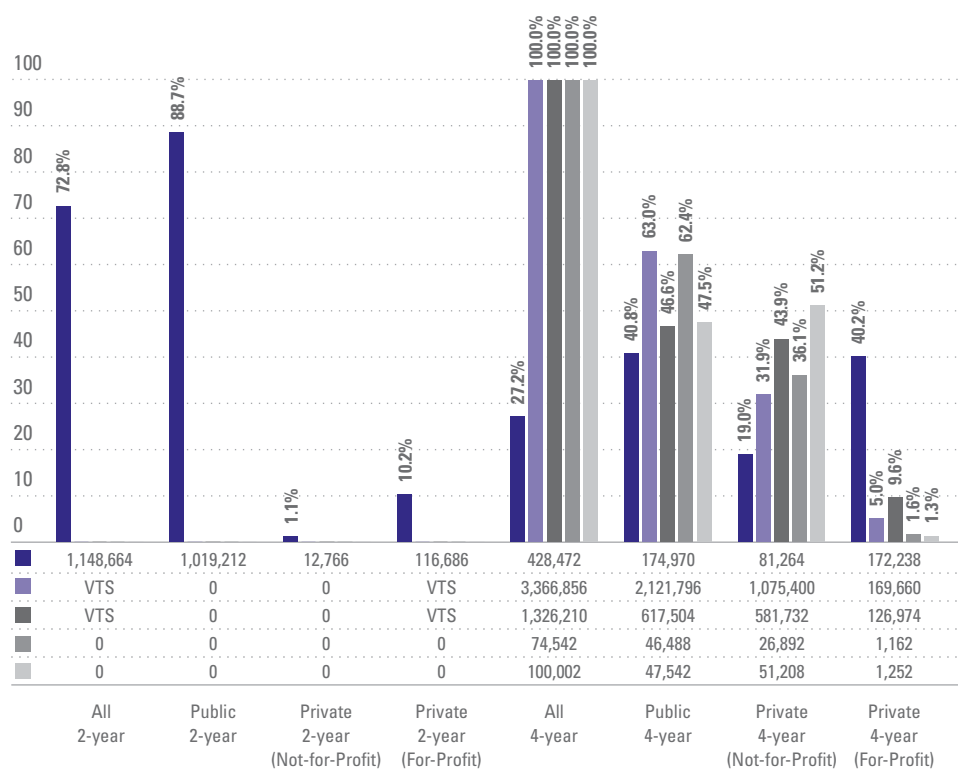
# 8.3%

As of 2009, 8.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to Hispanics.

## 9.4b

### Number of Degrees Granted in the Nation by Sector, 2009

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009  
 Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only. Values too small (VTS) to report bachelor's degrees and master's degrees at two-year institutions.

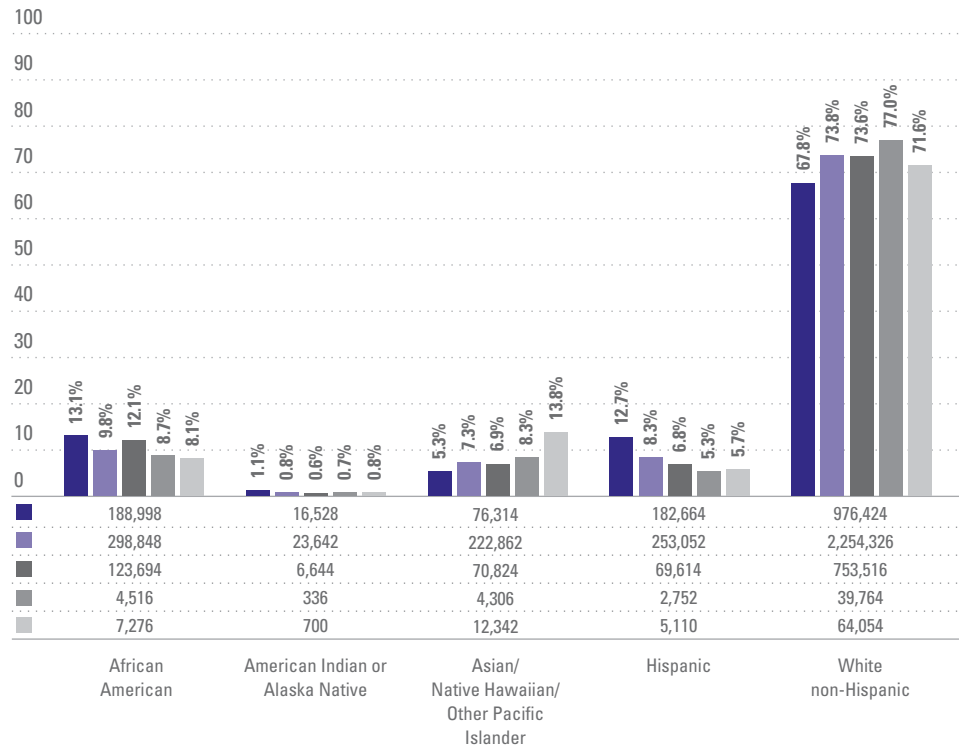


### 9.4c

## Number of Degrees Granted in the Nation by Race/Ethnicity, 2009

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009  
 Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

- Associate
- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctoral
- Professional

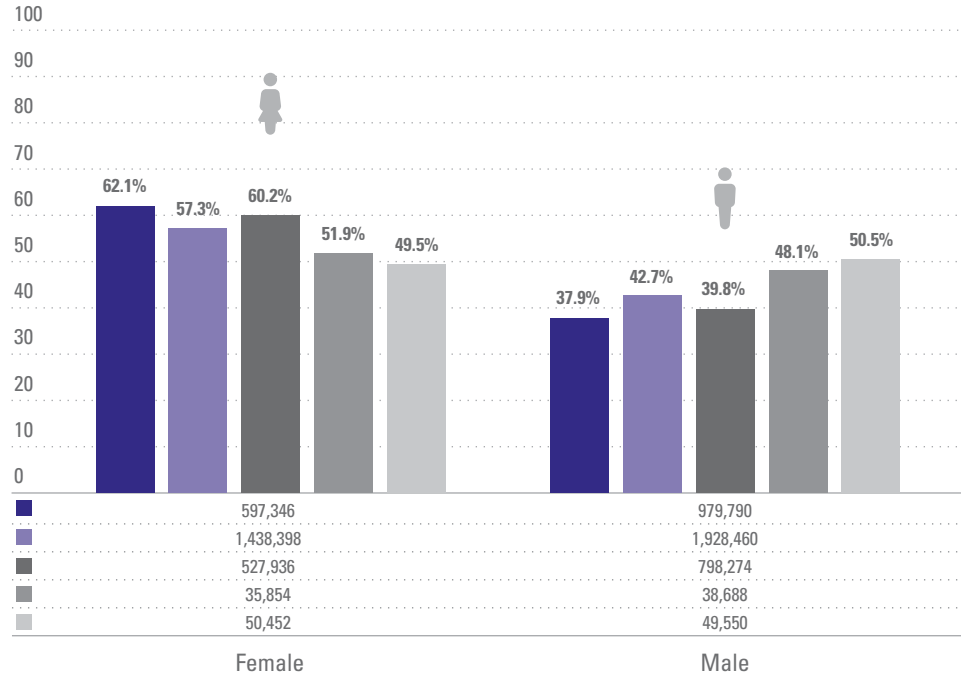


### 9.4d

### Number of Degrees Granted by Gender, 2009

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009  
 Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

- Associate
- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctoral
- Professional

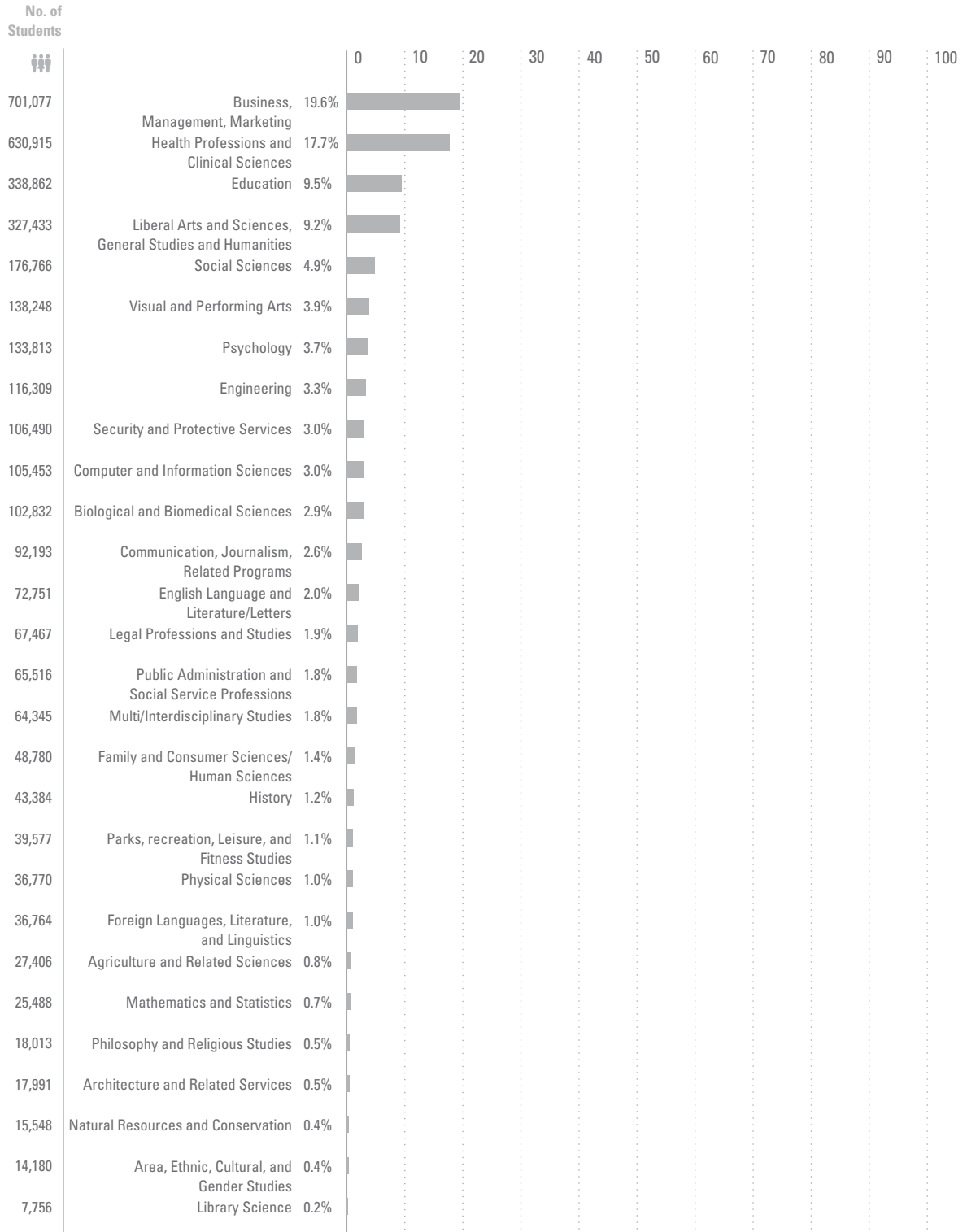


9.4e

**Total Degrees Awarded by Major CIP Code, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

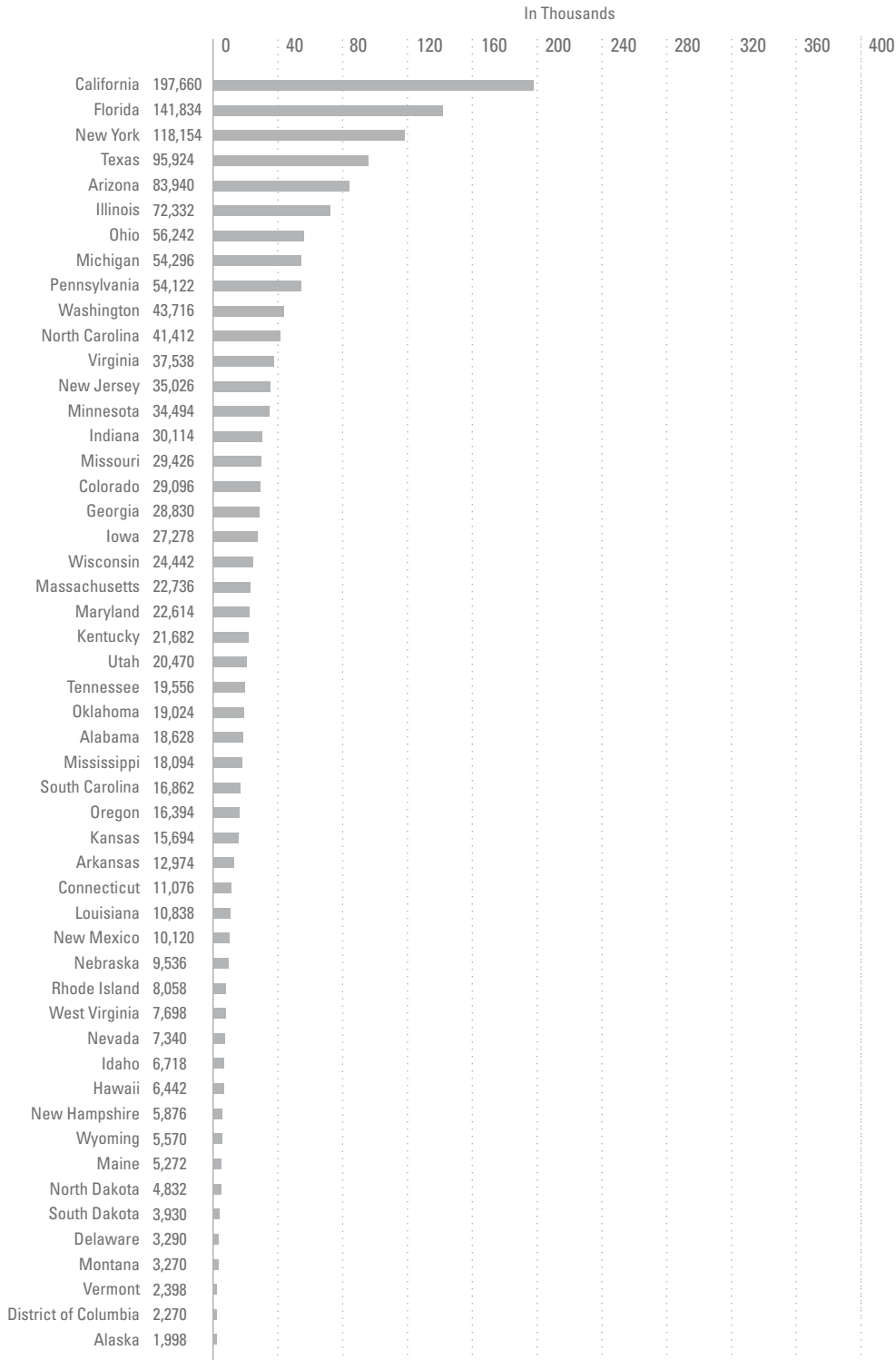


9.4f

**Number of Associate Degrees Awarded by State Rank, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

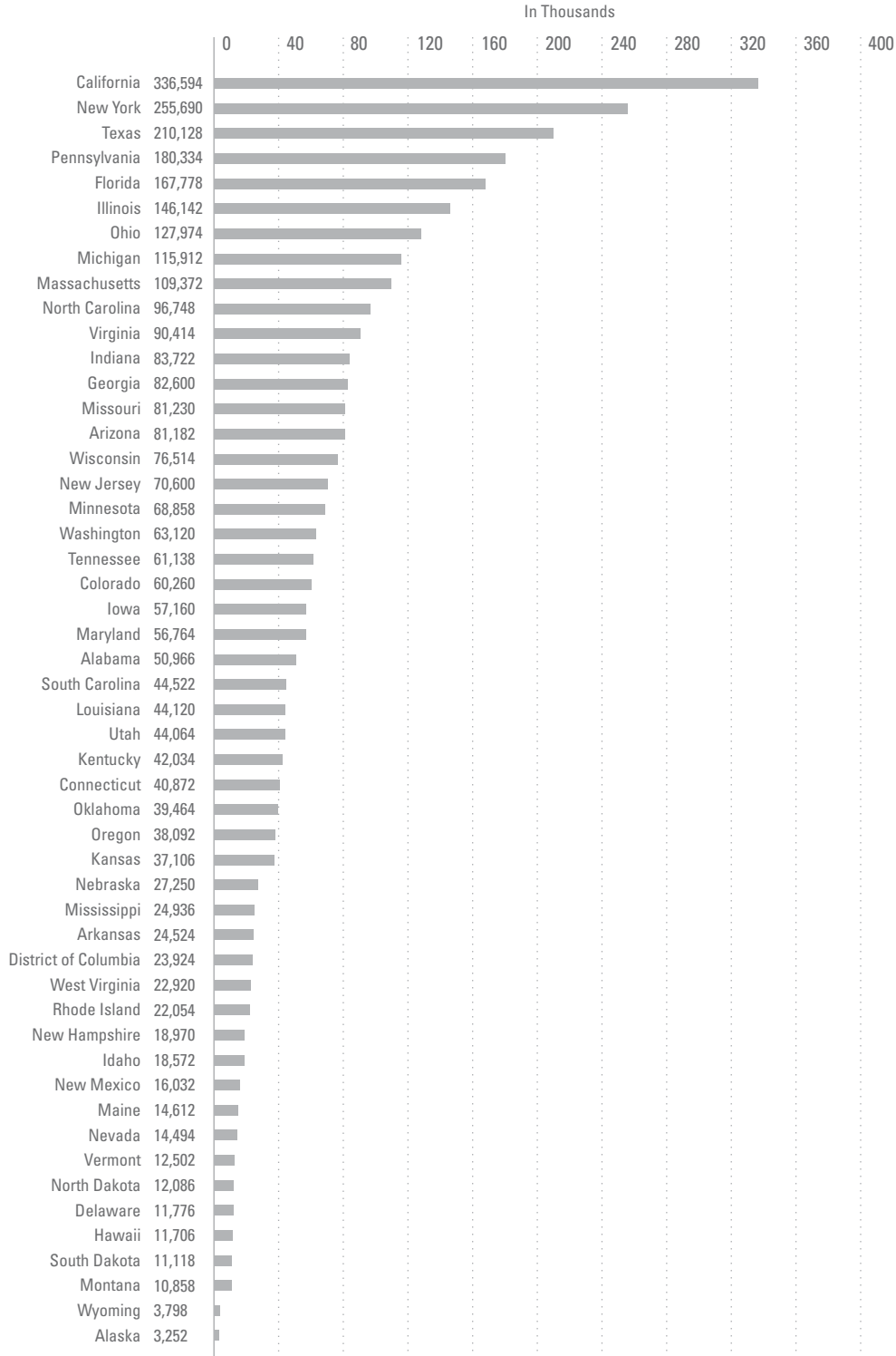


9.4g

**Number of Bachelor's Degrees Awarded by State Rank, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

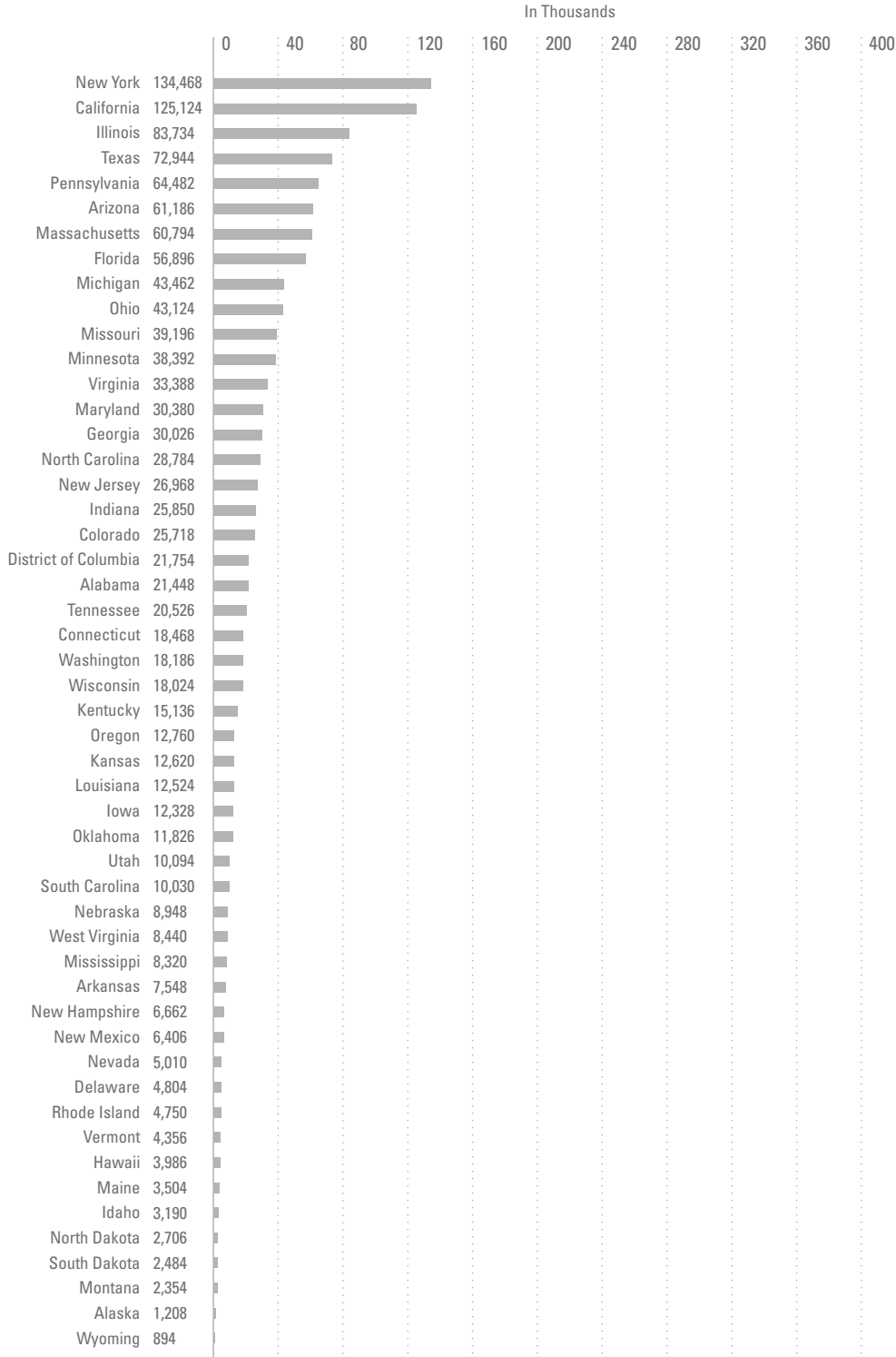


9.4h

**Number of Master's Degrees Awarded by State Rank, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

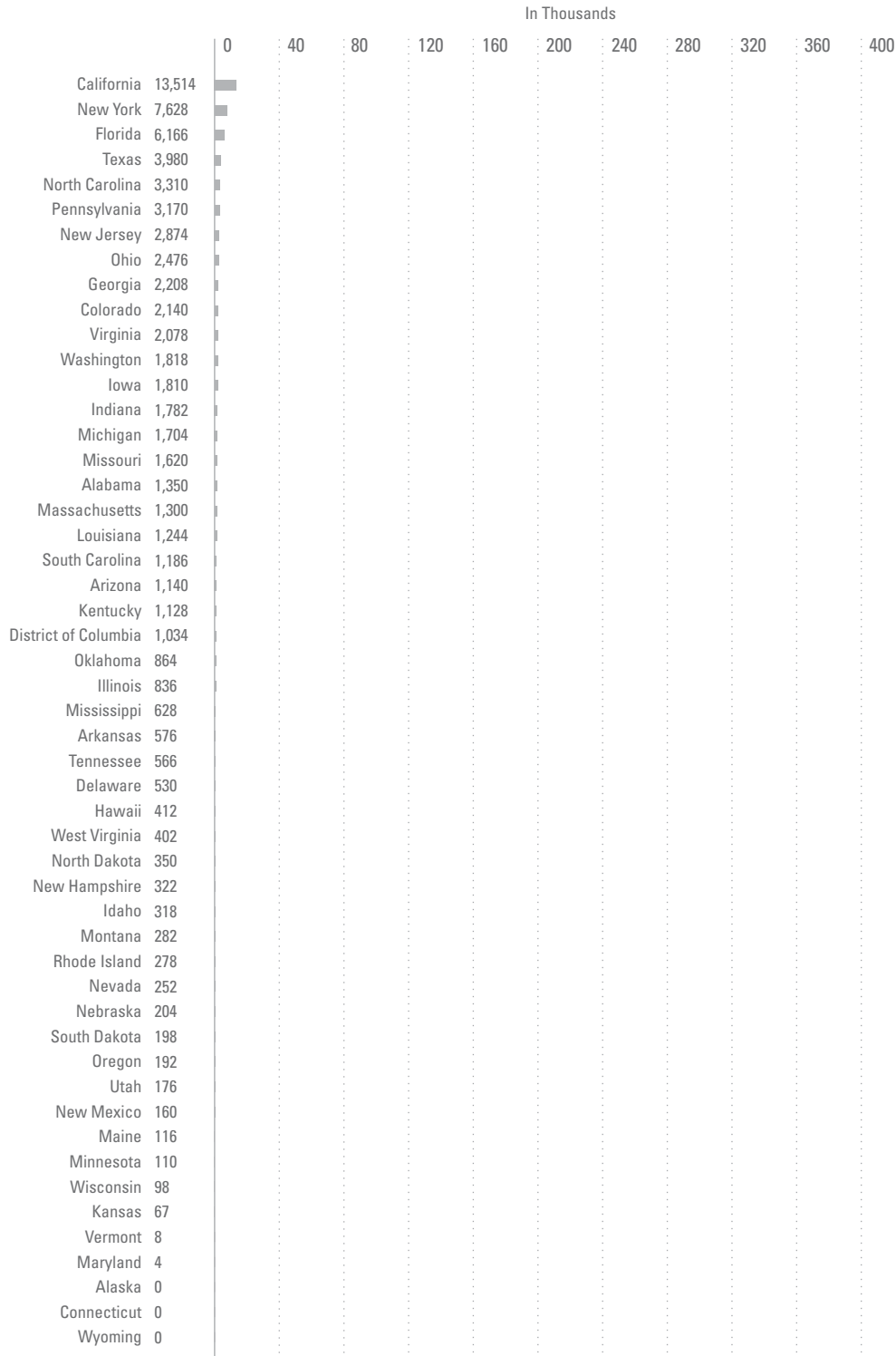


9.4i

**Number of Doctoral Degrees Awarded by State Rank, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.



9.4j

**Number of Professional Degrees Awarded by State Rank, 2009**

Source: NCES IPEDS Completion and Institution Characteristics Surveys, 2009

Note: U.S. Schools, degree granting, Title 4 schools only.

