



Legislative Report

Submitted to the Massachusetts Legislature
May 23, 2024

MASSACHUSETTS
Department of
Higher Education

CONTENTS

This report is submitted, pursuant to Chapter 28 of the Acts of 2023, line item 1596-2418, to the Joint Committee on Higher Education and the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means. It details the metrics and benchmarks being used to measure the success of the MassReconnect program.

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LETTER FROM THE COMMISSIONER

Dear Honorable Co-Chairs of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means and Higher Education:

I am pleased to submit this legislative report on the MassReconnect program for the first implementation year, FY24.

The report summarizes the metrics that will be used to measure the success of the MassReconnect program, the rationale for each metric, and the baseline and fall 2023 data for each metric. It concludes with an overview of other metrics and assessments that may be used going forward. As required by the FY24 GAA, this report has been developed in consultation with the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges. Please note this report reflects fall 2023 data only, and a subsequent report will include spring and full-year enrollment data.

As you will read in the report, MassReconnect appears to have driven a significant enrollment increase among adults at our 15 community colleges in its first semester of implementation, as well as the first overall increase in community college enrollment in a decade. Additionally, this new level of access to higher education has been shared across all subgroups we have examined, which is a testament to the power of MassReconnect to help advance equity goals. Many thanks are owed to our community college partners and the DHE team for their work promoting and implementing this program.

Another notable outcome of the MassReconnect implementation is a substantial increase in the FAFSA completion rate among students in the MassReconnect-eligible population. FAFSA completion ensures that students are accessing all the aid available to them, maximizing federal funding and keeping students' costs and potential debt as low as possible, and this is another outcome to celebrate.

On behalf of the Department, the community colleges, and the thousands of students benefitting from MassReconnect, thank you for your support for this program. Questions about this report may be directed to Alex Demou, Director of Constituent and Legislative Affairs at ademou@dhe.mass.edu.

Sincerely,

Noe Ortega

Commissioner of Higher Education

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Nearly two million Massachusetts residents over the age of 25 have a high school diploma or equivalent, but no higher education credential, limiting their career opportunities. MassReconnect is a \$20M initiative led by the Department of Higher Education in partnership with Massachusetts' public community colleges to make higher education more affordable and accessible to students 25 years of age and older.



The financial assistance and support services offered through the MassReconnect program enable students 25 years of age and older to attend one of Massachusetts' 15 public community colleges and earn an associate degree or certificate at no cost to them. MassReconnect covers the cost of full- or part-time tuition and fees, and participants receive an allowance to pay for books and supplies.

MassReconnect provides more funding to create greater access for students from lower-resourced communities. This includes the 700,000 students with some higher education credits who do not have a degree or credential.

To be eligible, Massachusetts residents must:

- Be at least 25 years of age or older as of the first day of classes
- Have been a resident of the Commonwealth for at least one year as of the start of the enrollment term
- Have not previously received an associate or bachelor's degree or the equivalent
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Be a U.S. citizen or have approved eligibility status as a high school completer under the Tuition Equity law
- Enroll in at least six credits per semester
- Meet satisfactory academic progress according to the institution's requirements and federal standards

Awards are made directly by the community colleges at the point of enrollment throughout the academic year.

METRIC 1: ENROLLMENT OF ADULT STUDENTS & NUMBER OF GRANT RECIPIENTS

As a “last dollar” financial aid program, MassReconnect covers any remaining financial need for adults without degrees who enroll in community colleges, after the application of other federal and state aid for which each student qualifies toward their tuition, fees, and a books and supplies allowance. It also functions as a messaging platform to encourage adults to enroll or re-enroll in college, including some who will find their costs fully covered by Pell Grants and/or other aid. Therefore, all of our metrics examine adults age 25 or over, whether or not they received a MassReconnect grant, as well as MassReconnect grant recipients specifically. This metric tracks enrollment by student type (various types of new students, as well as continuing).

Metric

Enrollment of adults age 25 or over in community colleges and number of MassReconnect grant recipients, overall and among new student types.

Fall 2023 Summary

- Overall enrollment of adults age 25 or older increased +12.0% (+2,635 students) in fall 2023.
- Among new students (new first-time, new transfer, and readmitted / reactivated students) age 25 or over, enrollment increased +44.8% (+2,604 students).
 - First-time freshman enrollment among adults age 25 or older increased +62.6% (+995 students). First-time freshmen are students who are enrolling in college for the first time ever.
 - New transfer enrollment among adults age 25 or older increased +27.3% (+531 students). New transfers are students who have previously attended college elsewhere.
 - Readmitted / reactivated enrollment among adults age 25 or older increased +47.5% (+1,078 students). Readmitted or reactivated students were previously degree-seeking students at the same institution and have reapplied after a lengthy period of non-enrollment, as defined by the institution’s policies.
- Comparing the population of 4,501 MassReconnect grant recipients and the overall population of students age 25 or over, the grant recipients were more likely than the overall population to be first-time freshmen (14.9% and 10.5%, respectively), transfers (12.0% and 10.1%, respectively), or readmitted/reactivated students (19.2% and 13.6%, respectively).

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
First-Time Freshman	1,590	2,585
Transfer	1,946	2,477
Readmitted/Reactivated	2,271	3,349
Continuing / Other	16,174	16,205
All Students	21,981	24,616

MassReconnect Grant Recipients

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
First-Time Freshman	n/a	670
Transfer	n/a	542
Readmitted/Reactivated	n/a	866
Continuing / Other	n/a	2,423
All Students	n/a	4,501

METRIC 2: RACE/ETHNICITY OF ADULT STUDENTS & GRANT RECIPIENTS

MassReconnect benefits all adult learners without degrees with the opportunity for an affordable, accessible college education. This metric, like all others, looks at the impact that the message of free community college is having on enrollment of adult learner subgroups, as well as the distribution of the direct aid by subgroup.

Metric

Enrollment of students age 25 or over in community colleges and number of students receiving MassReconnect grants, disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

Fall 2023 Summary

- Among new students (new first-time, new transfer, and readmitted / reactivated students) age 25 or over, there was enrollment growth within every racial/ethnic group, including +58.9% (+618) for Black or African American students, +46.6% (+625) for Hispanic or Latino students, and +38.7% (+1,024) for White students.
- There was also enrollment growth among every racial/ethnic group in the overall population of adults age 25 or over, including an +18.9% increase (+866) in Hispanic or Latino students, a +16.3% increase (+676) in Black or African American students, and a +6.1% increase (+620) in White students.
- Comparing the population of MassReconnect grant recipients and the overall population of students age 25 or over (students of known race only), the racial/ethnic diversity is comparable, but the grant recipients were slightly more likely than the overall population to be Hispanic or Latino (24.8% and 23.5% respectively) or White (47.1% and 46.5% respectively), and slightly less likely to be Black or African American (18.6% and 20.8% respectively).

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over

Fall Cohort	Race/Ethnicity	2022	2023
New Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	14	19
	Asian or Pacific Islander	274	341
	Black or African American	1,049	1,667
	Hispanic or Latino	1,341	1,966
	Two or more races	211	375
	White	2,643	3,667
	All Known Races/Ethnicities	5,532	8,035
All Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	50	56
	Asian or Pacific Islander	1,127	1,164
	Black or African American	4,135	4,811
	Hispanic or Latino	4,576	5,442
	Two or more races	767	895
	White	10,142	10,762
	All Known Races/Ethnicities	20,797	23,130

MassReconnect Grant Recipients

Fall Cohort	Race/Ethnicity	2022	2023
New Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	n/a	7
	Asian or Pacific Islander	n/a	80
	Black or African American	n/a	361
	Hispanic or Latino	n/a	499
	Two or more races	n/a	92
	White	n/a	993
	All Known Races/Ethnicities	n/a	2,032
All Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	n/a	10
	Asian or Pacific Islander	n/a	212
	Black or African American	n/a	814
	Hispanic or Latino	n/a	1,084
	Two or more races	n/a	190
	White	n/a	2,058
	All Known Races/Ethnicities	n/a	4,368

Note: "New Students" includes first-time freshmen, transfer, and readmitted/reactivated. Students of unknown race, including U.S. non-residents, are excluded from these tables.

METRIC 3: GENDER OF ADULT STUDENTS & GRANT RECIPIENTS

Metric

Enrollment of students age 25 or over in community colleges and number of students receiving MassReconnect grants, disaggregated by gender.

Fall 2023 Summary

- Among new students (new first-time, new transfer, and readmitted / reactivated students) age 25 or over, male enrollment increased +53.9% (+903) and female enrollment increased +40.8% (+1,672).
- Overall enrollment of male adults age 25 or over increased +17.3% (+1,048) and of female adults age 25 or over increased +9.5% (+1,502).

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over

Fall Cohort	Gender	2022	2023
New Students	Female	4,103	5,775
	Male	1,675	2,578
	Unknown	29	58
	All Genders	5,807	8,411
All Students	Female	15,793	17,295
	Male	6,074	7,122
	Unknown	114	199
	All Genders	21,981	24,616

MassReconnect Grant Recipients

Fall Cohort	Gender	2022	2023
New Students	Female	n/a	1,396
	Male	n/a	667
	Unknown	n/a	15
	All Genders	n/a	2,078
All Students	Female	n/a	3,051
	Male	n/a	1,431
	Unknown	n/a	19
	All Genders	n/a	4,501

Note: "New Students" includes first-time freshmen, transfer, and readmitted/reactivated.

METRIC 4: AGE GROUP OF ADULT STUDENTS & GRANT RECIPIENTS

MassReconnect is intended to offer all adults who do not have college degrees the opportunity to benefit from a college education. Whether they are just beginning their career or are entering or returning to college later in life, benefits may include achievement of personal, academic, and career goals along with societal benefits such as greater civic engagement. This metric indicates which age groups are taking advantage of this opportunity and at what scale.

Metric

Enrollment of students age 25 or over in community colleges and number of students receiving MassReconnect grants, disaggregated by age group.

Fall 2023 Summary

- Among new students age 25 or over, there was enrollment growth within every age group, including an +36.4% increase (+1,295) in the 25–34 group and a +52.5% increase (+793) in the 35–44 group.
- Among all students age 25 or over, there was also enrollment growth within every age group, including an +8.5% increase (+1,113) in the 25–34 group and a +15.8% increase (+904) in the 35–44 group.
- Comparing the population of MassReconnect grant recipients and the overall population of students age 25 or over, both were predominantly 25–34, but particularly the grant recipients (64.0% of grant recipients and 57.9% of the overall population).

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over

Fall Cohort	Age Group	2022	2023
New Students	25–34	3,558	4,853
	35–44	1,511	2,304
	45–54	547	926
	55 or over	191	328
	All 25 or over	5,807	8,411
All Students	25–34	13,144	14,257
	35–44	5,739	6,643
	45–54	2,244	2,640
	55 or over	854	1,076
	All 25 or over	21,981	24,616

MassReconnect Grant Recipients

Fall Cohort	Age Group	2022	2023
New Students	25–34	n/a	1,246
	35–44	n/a	514
	45–54	n/a	240
	55 or over	n/a	78
	All 25 or over	n/a	2,078
All Students	25–34	n/a	2,880
	35–44	n/a	1,080
	45–54	n/a	405
	55 or over	n/a	136
	All 25 or over	n/a	4,501

Note: "New Students" includes first-time freshmen, transfer, and readmitted/reactivated.

METRIC 5: FAFSA OR MASFA COMPLETION RATE AMONG ADULT STUDENTS

Of all MassReconnect grant criteria, the requirement to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the new Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA) likely introduces the greatest potential barriers for students, as these forms are perceived as complex and stressful to complete, particularly for families who are new to the college and financial aid application process. A [2023 paper from Brookings](#) states:

The FAFSA has historically been a very difficult form to navigate. The process can be especially challenging for low-income students, who tend to have fewer academic supports and whose parents are less likely to have been through the college application process. Financial challenges and anxieties associated with poverty can further strain families' ability to navigate complex processes.

With the introduction of MassReconnect, any Massachusetts resident without a prior degree who enrolls at a community college for six or more credits per term is guaranteed aid to cover tuition, fees, and a books and supplies allowance—as long as they complete the FAFSA or MASFA. This metric tells us what percentage of students who meet all other criteria for MassReconnect have checked the final box of completing the FAFSA or MASFA, claiming all aid available to them, up to and including a MassReconnect grant if needed.

Metric

Percentage of adult students who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA), along with meeting all other primary MassReconnect grant criteria (Massachusetts residency, no prior degree, enrolled for six or more credits per term).

Note: MASFA was launched in January 2024, so completion data is not yet available but will be included in future reports.

Fall 2023 Summary

- Among new students age 25 or over who met MassReconnect's residency, credit & prior education requirements, FAFSA completion was 86.2%, an increase of +7.4 percentage points over fall 2022.
- Among all students age 25 or over who met MassReconnect's residency, credit & prior education requirements, FAFSA completion was 82.2%, an increase of +5.2 percentage points over fall 2022.
- By comparison, FAFSA completion among comparable students in the under 25 population were lower and relatively flat compared to fall 2022, suggesting that MassReconnect had a positive effect on FAFSA completion among its target population.

- Within the new student subpopulation:
 - There were increases in FAFSA completion rates among every racial/ethnic group within this population, with Asian or Pacific Islander students having the largest increase of +13.1 percentage points, followed by White students at +9.6 percentage points, Black or African American students at +5.9 percentage points, and Hispanic or Latino students at +4.8 percentage points. Nonetheless, FAFSA completion rates among Asian or Pacific Islander and Black or African American students within this population were lower than the overall rate, at 80.2% and 84.9% respectively.
 - There were also increases in these rates among every gender group, including an increase of +10.9 percentage points for male students and +6.2 percentage points for female students. The 80.6% rate for male students still trails the overall rate.
- Within the all student subpopulation:
 - There were increases in FAFSA completion rates among every racial/ethnic group within this population, with White students having the largest increase of +7.0 percentage points, followed by Asian or Pacific Islander students at +6.6 percentage points, Black or African American students at +4.9 percentage points, and Hispanic or Latino students at +3.1 percentage points. Nonetheless, FAFSA completion rates among Asian or Pacific Islander students within this population were lower than the overall rate, at 74.5%, and rates among Black or African American and White students were near the overall average at 82.9% and 82.8% respectively.
 - There were also increases in these rates among every gender group, including an increase of +8.8 percentage points for male students and +4.1 percentage points for female students. The 74.9% rate for male students still trails the overall rate.
- While these improvements in FAFSA completion rates among the target population are impressive, according to this analysis, there were 2,872 enrolled students who otherwise qualified for MassReconnect but did not complete FAFSA. These included 571 Black or African American students, 549 Hispanic or Latino students, and 1,171 White students or, by gender, 1,637 female students and 1,204 male students. Additional emphasis on FAFSA completion efforts may improve the rates and equitable access to this program.

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over who meet MassReconnect residency, credit & prior education requirements

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
New Students	78.8%	86.2%
All Students	77.0%	82.2%

Comparison: Students Under Age 25 who meet MassReconnect residency, credit & prior education requirements

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
New Students	78.2%	78.4%
All Students	67.1%	66.6%

Adult Students Age 25 or Over by Race/Ethnicity who meet MassReconnect residency, credit & prior education requirements

Fall Cohort	Race/Ethnicity	2022	2023
New Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	100.0%*	83.3%*
	Asian or Pacific Islander	67.0%	80.2%
	Black or African American	79.0%	84.9%
	Hispanic or Latino	83.9%	88.7%
	Two or more races	88.8%	89.0%
	White	78.3%	87.8%
All Students	American Indian or Alaskan Native	94.3%*	91.2%*
	Asian or Pacific Islander	67.9%	74.5%
	Black or African American	78.0%	82.9%
	Hispanic or Latino	82.8%	85.9%
	Two or more races	83.5%	89.4%
	White	75.8%	82.8%

* Use caution when interpreting rates marked with asterisks as they are based on very small numbers of students (n's range from 9 to 35).

Adult Students Age 25 or Over by Gender who meet MassReconnect residency, credit & prior education requirements

Fall Cohort	Gender	2022	2023
New Students	Female	82.7%	88.9%
	Male	69.7%	80.6%
	Unknown	43.8%*	72.9%*
All Students	Female	81.4%	85.5%
	Male	66.1%	74.9%
	Unknown	50.0%*	66.3%*

*Use caution when interpreting rates marked with asterisks as they are based on very small numbers of students (n's range from 16 to 92).

Adult Students Age 25 or Over by Age Group who meet MassReconnect residency, credit & prior education requirements

Fall Cohort	Age Group	2022	2023
New Students	25–34	79.9%	86.5%
	35–44	78.7%	86.8%
	45–54	73.2%	84.8%
	55 or over	69.6%	81.9%
All Students	25–34	78.5%	83.0%
	35–44	77.1%	83.2%
	45–54	69.8%	78.7%
	55 or over	63.0%	71.3%

METRIC 6: RETENTION OF ADULT STUDENTS & GRANT RECIPIENTS

Beyond encouraging qualifying Massachusetts adults to enroll in college, it is important that the MassReconnect program supports students in continuing their progress toward degree completion. A key metric is the percentage of new students who return for a second year.

Metric

Percentage of new students enrolling in community colleges who return in the subsequent year, for the overall population of students age 25 or over and for students receiving MassReconnect grants.

Fall 2023 Summary

- We will not be able to report on retention of the fall 2023 cohort until early 2025, after the fall 2024 semester.

Baseline and 2023 Data

Adult Students Age 25 or Over

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
First-Time Freshman	53.1%	TBD in early 2025
Transfer	58.4%	TBD in early 2025
Readmitted/Reactivated	50.1%	TBD in early 2025

MassReconnect Grant Recipients

Fall Cohort	2022	2023
First-Time Freshman	n/a	TBD in early 2025
Transfer	n/a	TBD in early 2025
Readmitted/Reactivated	n/a	TBD in early 2025

Note: Cohort indicates the term in which the student first enrolled.

PLANNING FOR ADDITIONAL METRICS & ASSESSMENT

- **Other Barriers to Enrollment:** The metrics outlined in this document only examine the enrolled population. Metrics that measure barriers leading up to enrollment are difficult to define. Going forward, we expect to engage in qualitative analysis to gain a better understanding of why potential participants are not applying or enrolling, with a particular emphasis on ensuring the program is being accessed equitably by different subgroups.
- **Longer-Term Success Metrics:** After more time has elapsed, we will be able to report on longer-term success metrics.