



SCALING THROUGH SYSTEMS: A SUNY OHEP RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

Measuring Excellence in Student Outcomes

SUNY’s Office of Higher Education in Prison (OHEP) has centralized data from across the SUNY system of higher education in prison (HEP) providers in its longitudinal data system (LDS). It supports disciplined growth by tying expansion to indicators of quality and student success. Consistent with SUNY’s mission to promote access to educational services of the highest quality, the LDS helps OHEP monitor whether programs are meeting incarcerated learners’ needs.¹ Centralized data does not explain every outcome, but it strengthens accountability by showing where gaps persist and where interventions may help.

MEASURING PROGRESS WITH STUDENT RETENTION

A key metric for measuring program quality is student retention, defined here as students’ continuous enrollment within the SUNY system. Analyzing retention helps us ensure our students have adequate support to maintain continuous enrollment and progression towards their degree. SUNY’s HEP programs are not designed simply to increase participation, they aim to help students persist to degree completion and leverage their degree to find gainful employment after release. To accomplish those goals, SUNY’s system approach to higher education in prison provides a continuum of care not always achievable by individual programs.

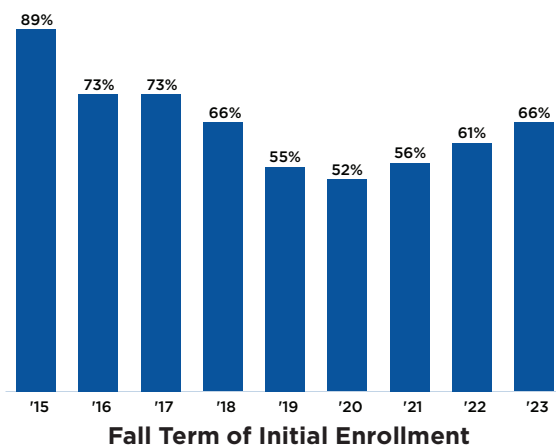
By current estimates, 53% of SUNY’s incarcerated students have experienced a correctional facility transfer at some point during their incarceration.² This underscores the importance of SUNY’s systems-approach, which prioritizes supporting students through transfers. Since 2015, approximately 240 incarcerated SUNY students have taken classes from multiple SUNY campuses while incarcerated, reflecting student mobility within the SUNY HEP system.³ Because SUNY coordinates system-wide, throughout its statewide

network of SUNY HEP programs, students who are displaced have a pathway to enroll and persist to degree completion—their displacement doesn’t bar access to higher education.

In addition to facility transfers, other carceral constraints—including unpredictable lockdowns, restricted access to technology, limited academic advising, and abrupt interruptions due to release or changes in custody status—may also have a negative impact on student success. Coordination among SUNY campuses can support students through their diverse, non-linear academic journeys amidst these unique challenges. By aligning degree offerings, utilizing existing seamless transfer policies, and participating in a community of practice that enables regular communication and information-sharing, SUNY programs can reduce the academic disruption caused by carceral instability and help students persist despite structural barriers beyond their control.

Institutional support is also offered to SUNY’s HEP programs to make them more resilient to external factors that are detrimental to programming, like the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2025 statewide corrections officer strike. These external shocks may limit the number of HEP programs running each semester, forcing college programs in some facilities to pause. Data below shows that while the 2020 cohort of students who first enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced a decline in their one-year retention rate, the 2021 cohort rebounded to pre-pandemic retention levels. This suggests SUNY HEP programs can absorb external shocks to programming without permanent detriment to retention rates.

SUNY HEP 1-YEAR RETENTION RATES



1 New York Education Law § 351 (State university mission). https://newyork.public.law/laws/n.y._education_law_section_351.

2 Facility transfers are defined as student movements between distinct DOCCS facilities and are measured as the share of SUNY higher education in prison students between 2015 and 2025 who appear in more than one DOCCS facility during that period.

3 Over ten years, the 240 recorded campus transfers represent a small share of incarcerated SUNY students experiencing campus transfers, consistent with the role of education hold policies and related safeguards in limiting student movement during enrollment.

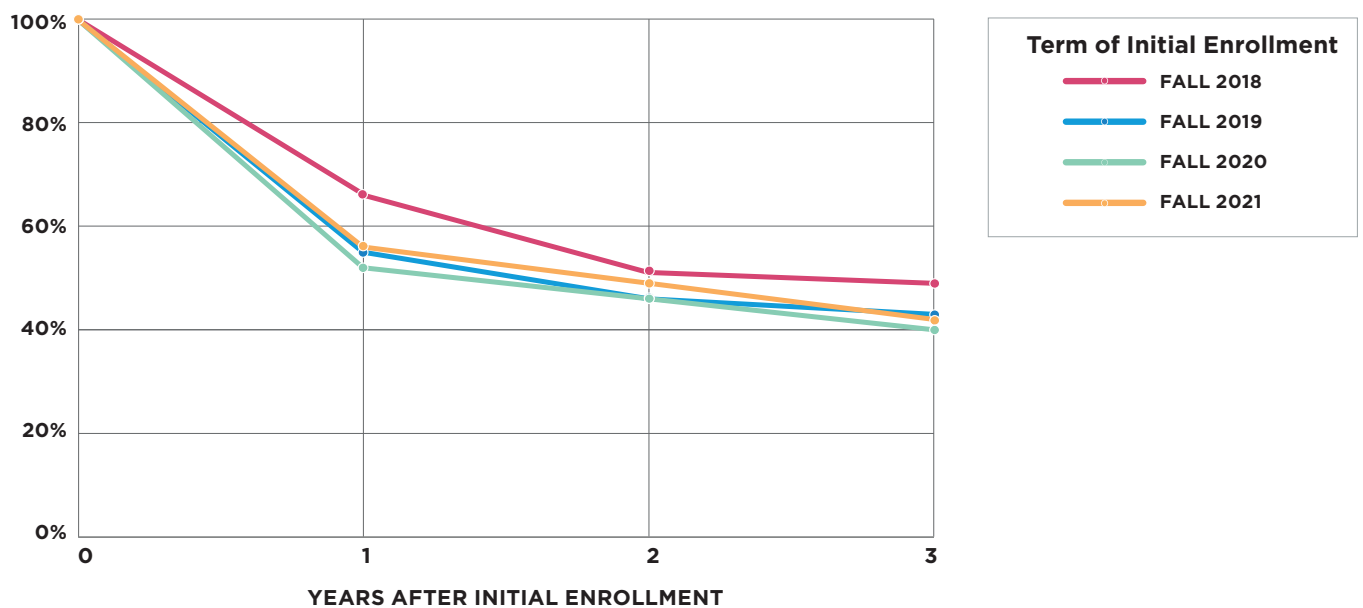
SUNY’s earliest HEP programs were concentrated in maximum-security facilities, where students were less likely to experience facility transfers or be released. This context helps explain the relatively high retention rates observed among the 2015–2017 cohorts. As SUNY’s HEP programming has expanded statewide to reach a larger and more diverse student population, lower retention rates are expected, reflecting increased exposure to transfers and other disruptions. More recent cohorts, however, show improving retention, suggesting that SUNY’s programs are adapting to better support students as the initiative continues to scale.

As discussed in previous briefs in this series, enrollment in HEP programs has increased steadily from 2019 to 2022, and student retention trends have shown improvement in tandem. The most recent cohort of SUNY HEP students achieved a system-level first-year retention rate of 66.2%, demonstrating the effectiveness of the SUNY system of HEP programs is doing to support and retain their students. For comparison, SUNY’s campus-level one-year retention rate across all community colleges was most recently reported at 61.5%.⁴ This campus-level measure provides a useful benchmark, though it is not directly comparable due to the ability of SUNY HEP students to remain enrolled while moving across SUNY institutions operating in different correctional facilities. We expect first-year retention rates to improve as more SUNY HEP programs start in additional correctional facilities statewide, enhancing even further SUNY’s ability to support students through facility transfers.

Analyzing longer-term retention trends ensures SUNY HEP students receive support well beyond their first year. The longitudinal data below illustrates the lasting impact of COVID-19 while confirming a critical detail: the most dramatic decline in retention occurs in year one. While attrition continues in subsequent years, the number of students dropping out is always highest within the first year. Therefore, prioritizing first-year retention is the most logical choice for maximizing student success.

While the current data demonstrates SUNY’s resilience to the pandemic, future analyses will allow us to test that same durability of programming during more recent disruptions, specifically the 2025 statewide corrections officer strike. Patterns reported here are descriptive and will be explored more rigorously as additional cohorts mature and comparative data become available.

RETENTION OF SUNY HEP STUDENTS PER TERM OF INITIAL ENROLLMENT



4 SUNY Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics. 2025-26 *SUNY Institutional Research Fact Book-Vol. 1*. January 15, 2026. <https://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/institutional-research/SUNY-IR-Fact-Book-2025-2026-Vol.-1-as-of-January-15,-2026.pdf>.

CHECKING COMPLETION AND OTHER OUTCOMES

While persistence trends demonstrate SUNY's capacity to sustain enrollment under carceral constraints, graduation rates reveal whether the system is translating academic continuity into program completion. The LDS shows graduation trends, among other academic outcomes, with more granularity, offering a more complete view of students' academic journeys and allowing SUNY to track student progress more accurately, system-wide. For instance, facility transfers—which were previously recorded as dropouts for individual programs—can now be identified as continuous enrollment within the SUNY system.

Recent LDS analyses reveal the following key findings:

- **AVERAGE TIME TO DEGREE:** For SUNY HEP students in associate programs, **the average time to degree completion is 2.48 years**, shorter than the average time to degree completion for students in associates' programs across all SUNY community colleges, which is 3.90 years.⁵
- **3-YEAR GRADUATION RATES:** **The 3-year graduation rate for SUNY HEP students first enrolling in associate programs in 2021-2022 is 32.4%**. This also compares favorably to 3-year graduation rates for all students across SUNY community college associate degree programs, most recently reported at 32%.
- **POST-RELEASE CONTINUITY:** **An estimated 553 alumni of SUNY HEP programs have re-enrolled after their release from prison.** This pathway back into higher education is supported by OHEP's reentry navigators, who transform in-prison academic momentum into long-term success after release. Examining the timing of first re-enrollment after release shows that **returns to higher education are most common in the first year: approximately one-quarter of reenrolling alumni returned within one year of release**, with additional students re-enrolling steadily in subsequent years.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Strong student retention and persistence suggest the SUNY network of HEP programs are supporting incarcerated learners as intended, and SUNY's systems approach is one factor enabling them to do so. The ability to support students through facility transfers, absorb external shocks to programming, and sustain academic momentum after release reflect the impact of a coordinated, system-wide design.

Metrics such as time to degree completion and graduation rates highlight the balancing act SUNY manages: helping students finish efficiently, keeping them enrolled despite transfers or disruptions, and providing access to as many students as possible. The system can navigate these tradeoffs effectively through system-wide coordination throughout the SUNY HEP network. Anchored by the longitudinal data system, SUNY's approach makes gaps visible and measurable, positioning the system not only to scale access and maintain quality, but also to target next phases of improvement: using evidence to guide future investments and refine program design.

5 2025-26 SUNY *Institutional Research Fact Book-Vol. 1*. January 15, 2026.

