First-generation status in context, part 5: Enrollment, persistence, and degree completion by detailed parental education

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Introduction

Defining a college applicant as "first-generation" offers a quick way to identify students who may need more support navigating college, from application to graduation.[1] Throughout the *First-generation status in context* series, Common App has shown both that applicants labeled first-generation have distinct experiences getting to and through college, and also that differences within students labeled "first-generation" can be substantial. For example, 31% of applicants with two parents with an Associate degree are eligible for a Common App fee-waiver, compared to 81% of applicants with a single parent who never attended college, a rate 2.6 times higher, a large difference between two groups considered first-generation.[2]

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[1] This brief treats the Higher Education Act definition for first-generation status as the standard definition. It defines first-generation status as "an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or, in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree."

[2] See our third research brief in this series, Exploring the complexities of detailed parental education.

In this research brief, our fifth in the series, we revisit this tension, extending our prior work by following applicants beyond application, through college enrollment to degree completion.[3] This mirrors the approach of <u>our most recent first-generation brief</u>, but this time, we consider the degree attainment of both applicants' parents, creating over 30 parent education categories within the traditional first-generation binary. To what extent do these differences we observed in pre-college experiences and application behaviors persist as applicants move through college? Do standard first-generation definitions adequately identify applicants who seem likely to benefit from additional support enrolling and earning degrees, and are there critical differences within this group that may need additional consideration?

Our findings both confirm that standard first-generation definitions do include students likely to benefit from additional support, particularly in completing degrees, and yet also reveal a wide range of average outcomes by parent education. Our approach highlights extremes: first-generation applicants reporting only one parent have average enrollment and degree completion rates considerably lower than the overall first-generation average, and continuing-generation applicants with two parents with advanced degrees have outcomes considerably higher than the continuing-generation average. Conversely, there is notable overlap between students labeled first and continuing-generation in the middle range of enrollment and degree completion rates.

These definitions have real-world consequences, in a time when many colleges, states, scholarships and other programs use first-generation status to identify students for additional support, and many use Common App to make those identifications.[4] Yet asking applicants to answer more questions, trying to align their unique family background to pre-defined options, is not without its own cost. This research brief offers such programs an opportunity to consider the complex experiences each student brings to their college journey, and weigh when detailed parent education information may be relevant.

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[3] This report is based on research funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.

[4] A <u>2024 survey of institutions by FirstGen Forward</u> found 81% of surveyed 4-year institutions use Common App or other admission applications as a source for identifying first-generation students.

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Key findings

1. **Parental education combinations provide critical nuance masked by traditional binary first and continuing-generation definitions.** While having parents with higher levels of education is associated with higher enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, there is substantial overlap between applicants considered "first" and "continuing-generation."

    a. The standard first-generation definition groups together students with a 58% completion rate alongside those with a 78% rate, a 20-point range in outcomes that likely reflects different college experiences shaped by differences in parent resources (Figure 7).

    b. Similarly, continuing-generation degree completion rates span between 70% and 92%, a 22-point range (Figure 7).

2. **We identify four rough groups of parental education combinations with similar college outcomes**. These are not predetermined categories but rather patterns that emerged in our findings. To make the patterns easier to discuss, we've assigned each group a descriptive name:

    a. **"Striving":** First-generation students reporting one parent**.** These applicants are correctly identified by the first-generation definition as needing support. Even once enrolled in a 4-year program, they complete degrees at rates 20-30 percentage points below their peers.

    b. **"Emerging":** Continuing-generation applicants reporting one parent as well as first-generation applicants with two parents with no or limited college experience. For example, applicants with a single parent with a Bachelor's degree have similar outcomes to applicants with two parents with no college history. While these groups on average have different levels of experience with college, economic resources, and household structure, they appear to share an experience figuring out college with some resources in place and others absent.

    c. **"Advancing":** First-generation applicants with two parents who both have at least some college experience, as well as continuing-generation applicants with one parent with a Bachelor's or higher and a second parent without a Bachelor's degree. This group marks a convergence of disparate parent education combinations;

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while these are typically separated by the label of first-generation definitions, their outcomes are nearly identical.

d. **"Established":** Continuing-generation applicants with two Bachelor's educated parents or higher. This group has uniformly high enrollment, persistence, and degree completion rates, with about 9 out of 10 completing a degree within 6 years of enrolling. The markedly higher outcomes for this group suggest that both parents' education (and other associated socio-economic characteristics like earnings, occupation and social connections) is consequential to the applicant's college experience.

3. **Gaps between parental education groups widen as applicants move along the higher education pathway.** The relative "advantage" of having parents with higher levels of education appears greater at degree completion than enrollment.

    a. Applicants with single parents with no or limited college experience and applicants with two parents with no college experience may be the best candidates for enrollment support.

    b. Once enrolled in a 4-year college, gaps between parental education combinations **start with persistence to second year** and **grow** through six-year Bachelor's degree completion rates.

    c. Detailed parental education combinations may be most critical for identifying enrolled students needing support to stay enrolled and earn degrees.

        i. There is a 34 percentage point difference between the lowest completion rate (58% of enrolled applicants with a single parent, no college experience) and the highest (92% of enrolled applicants with two parents with doctorate degrees), with other parental education combinations falling between these extremes

4. **Applicants who report information about only one parent have starkly lower four-year enrollment, persistence and degree completion rates.** Support programs and institutions may want to incorporate single-parent status as another indicator of socioeconomic background.

    a. Enrolled applicants reporting one parent with no college experience have Bachelor's degree completion rates 20 percentage points lower than applicants with two parents with Associate degrees (58% versus 78%).

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b. Even enrolled applicants with one parent with a Bachelor's degree or higher have distinctly lower Bachelor's completion rates than other continuing-generation applicants, with 70-76% earning a Bachelor's degree, closer to the first-generation average of 69% than the continuing-generation average of 86% (Figure 7).

5. **Focusing solely on the highest parental degree misses a critical part of the picture by excluding the second parent's degree.** For example, an applicant with at least one parent with a Bachelor's degree could fall into the "Emerging", "Advancing" or "Established" range of outcomes, depending entirely on the second parent's educational experience.

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Defining applicant's parental education and enrollment, persistence and degree outcomes

This analysis covers almost 784,000 domestic Common App applicants in the 2016-2017 application season. More specifically, this analysis includes any domestic applicant (U.S. citizens or permanent residents, whether applying from the U.S. or abroad) who indicated they planned to enroll in college in the 2017-2018 academic year, provided information on their parents' education, and submitted at least one application using the Common App.[5]

We determine parental degree combinations using an applicant's listed parents (regardless of whether living or whether they share a household with the student, and not inclusive of other caregivers in their household like step-parents). We include all degrees regardless of timing of receipt or institutional country. This is to mirror the Higher Education Act definition for first-generation status that Common App and many other organizations follow: "an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or, in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree."

Some applicants report only having information about one parent, and these applicants are referred to herein as having a "single parent" in this research brief, yet these applicants may still live with one parent and a step-parent or other household arrangement. These decisions reflect the complexity inherent in trying to simplify diverse family and education experience into one clear definition, a point we explore throughout the First-generation status in context series.

We use data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) StudentTracker service to follow Common App applicants over the following six years through enrollment, persistence, and degree completion. NSC's data allows us to observe applicant trajectories through most U.S. institutions, including those that do not use Common App for applications.

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[5] During the 2016-2017 application season, Common App had just over 700 active member institutions, in comparison with over 1,100 in the 2025-2026 season. Common App's member institutions and applicant pool have continued to diversify, with better coverage of public institutions and growth in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). For more on Common App's member institutions over time, see our research brief Growth and change: long-term trends in Common App membership. Note also that our applicants imperfectly represent the broader college-going or college-applying population (see, for example, Odle & Magouirk, 2023).

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NSC's record-level data provides information on over 98% of U.S. higher education enrollments during this time period. In addition to the small number of institutions outside NSC's coverage (e.g., institutions outside the U.S.), this research brief does not capture enrollment and degree outcomes for students who have blocked their records under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). As a result, **our estimates of enrollment and degree rates may be slightly lower than actual enrollment and degree rates** for the applicants in this study.[6]

Parental education combination frequency among Common App 2016-17 applicants

We begin our exploration by documenting the proportion of domestic Common App applicants in the 2016–2017 season (n=783,795) by parents' highest level of degree attainment, as well as each possible combination of parental degree attainment, in a tiled heatmap (Figure 1). This plot is most directly answering: How common is each highest parental degree attainment among our applicants? And then, how common are each of the possible parental degree combinations among our applicants?[7] Note that these data, and all other data shown in figures throughout this research brief, are downloadable in spreadsheet format.

Beginning with the right-most panel of tiles ("Combined"), each square displays the proportion of domestic first-year applicants in the 2016-2017 season in each parent's highest degree category, as indicated on the y-axis to the left. For example, 5.1% of applicants had parents whose highest degree among them was a Doctorate, while 13.9% of applicants had parents whose highest degree among them was a Professional Graduate degree (MBAs, JDs, and medical degrees). Tiles appearing above the solid black line are generally considered continuing-generation (as they represent students whose parents' highest degree was at least a Bachelor's degree), while tiles appearing below the solid line are generally considered first-generation (as they represent students whose parents' highest degree was less than a Bachelor's degree). Results here indicate that a Bachelor's was the most common highest parental degree at 30%, followed by Master's degree at 18%, and No college attendance at 17.3%

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[6] About 4% of student records are blocked nationally. For more information on coverage and blocks by state and demographic groups, see this report from the National Student Clearinghouse.

[7] This analysis matches the format of Figure 1 in our prior research brief on parental education outcomes and application behaviors for the 2022-23 applicant cohort.

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Figure 1. Share of applicants by highest parental degree and parental degree combination
Among domestic first-year applicants in the 2016-17 season (n=783,795)
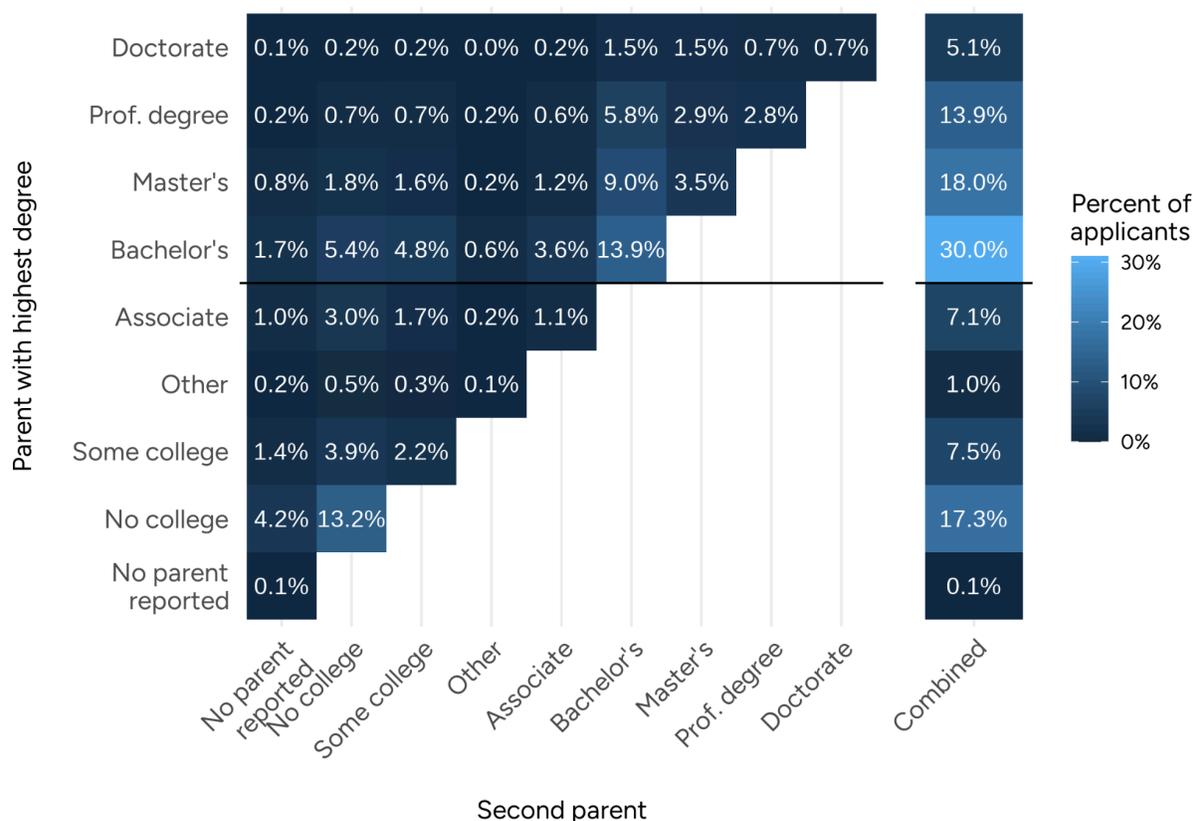
To examine the more detailed groupings of parental degree combinations, each tile in the main panel represents one possible degree combination for an applicant's parents. Each row going left-to-right breaks out students whose highest parental degree was as indicated on the vertical y-axis label; each column then represents the degree of the other parent (either the same degree, or lower). For example, the top-right title represents students with two parents who each obtained a Doctorate (0.7% of all domestic first-year applicants in the 2016-17 season). The next tile to the left also focuses on students whose highest parental degree was a Doctorate, but shows the proportion of these students whose other parent instead had a Professional Graduate degree (also 0.7% of applicants). The values of each tile in a row will sum to the value in the "Combined" tile on the right (plus or minus rounding error). Again, tiles above the black line are combinations where at least one parent has a bachelor's and so would be classified as continuing-generation students under our standard definition, while tiles below the black line would be classified as first-generation.

Applicants with two parents with a Bachelor's degree emerge as the most common combination, at 13.9% of all applicants, followed by two parents with no college

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experience (13.2%). At the other extreme, some parental education combinations make up less than 1% of all applicants. For visual clarity, we do not show outcomes for a few small and difficult to interpret reported parent education combinations, including no parents listed and parents with "other" education in the rest of the paper.

Enrollment by detailed parent education combinations

Next, we consider the enrollment outcomes of applicants within each detailed parent education combination. Are there differences in how applicants from each parental education background enroll in college, on average? We consider three enrollment outcomes, moving from a broad definition of enrolling in any post-secondary institution at any time in the six years following application and narrowing toward enrollments in four-year institutions only, and finally to enrollments in four-year institutions in the Fall following application.

We find that rates of enrolling at any institution are high and relatively equal across all parent education combinations. However, disparities emerge when considering "on-time" enrollments in 4-year institutions. Figure 2 provides a high level snapshot of our three enrollment outcomes, showing the overall range of outcomes by parent-education combinations. Figures 3 and 4 examine any enrollment and enrolling a 4-year institution in the Fall following application in greater detail.

Figure 2 shows the average enrollment rate for first-generation and continuing-generation applicants as a dotted line. Each point represents a parent-education combination within the first-generation and continuing-generation definitions. For example, on the topline, the leftmost dark-blue dot, with 89% enrolled at any level, anytime, represents applicants reporting one parent only, with no college experience, while the furthest right dot at 94% represents applicants with two parents with Associate degrees. These dots are hard to distinguish in the first visual showing any enrollment at any time, because outcomes are pretty overlapping across parent education combinations. Yet these dots, and the enrollment rates they represent, widen as our definition of enrollment narrows to enrolling in 4-year degree programs in Fall 2017, moving down Figure 2.

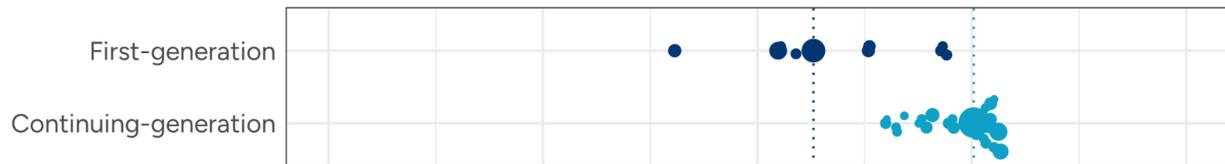**First-generation status in context, part 5:**
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Figure 2: Enrollment rates by parent-education combination and first-generation status
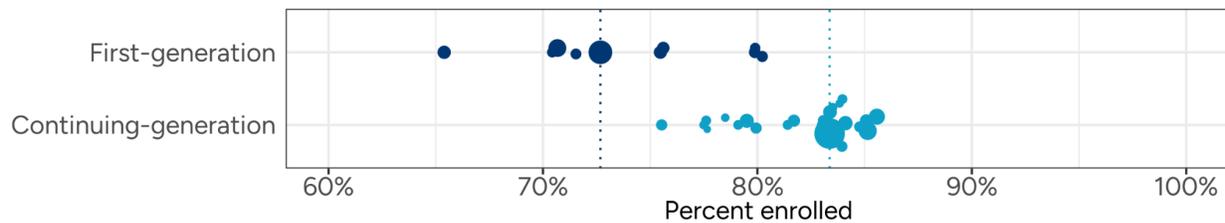
Any enrollment, anytime
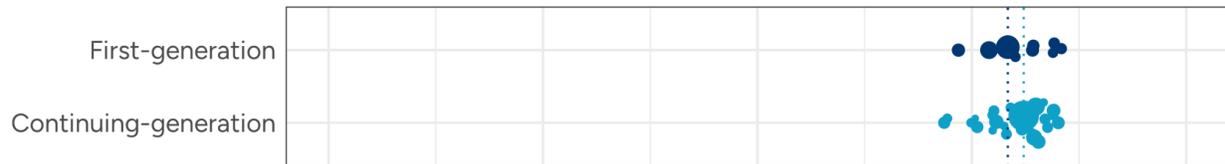
4-year enrollment, anytime

4-year enrollment, Fall 2017

Note that for all definitions of enrollment, enrollment rates within first and continuing-generation categories overlap for certain parent education combinations, meaning some parent education combinations labeled "first-generation" have higher enrollment rates than some parent-education combinations labeled "continuing-generation". The data do not show a clean break with all first-generation groups on the left and all continuing-generation outcomes on the right, but rather an overlapping, continuous range. Still, when we limit our examination to only 4-year degrees, as shown in the second and third rows of Figure 2, no "first-generation" parent-education combinations exceed the continuing-generation average (light blue dotted line).

Figure 3 zooms in on the results shown in Figure 2's first row, enrollment rates at any time in the six years following application. The left side axis shows an applicant's parents' highest degree, and the color of each dot shows the second parent's degree, with the relative size of each dot representing the proportion of applicants in each parent degree combination. The two charts break these parent degree combinations into those traditionally classified first-generation and

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continuing-generation. For example, applicants with two parents with no college experience have a 91% enrollment rate, shown by the green dot on the second line of the first chart.

Enrollment rates are within a few percentage points of one another, centered around 92%. Indeed, some of the lowest enrollment rates are at either extreme of parental education: applicants with one parent with no college experience (89%) and dual Professional degree and/or Doctorate combinations (89%). This data is also available in downloadable spreadsheet format.

These results suggest that an applicant's parents' educational background is not strongly associated with general enrollment. About 9 out of 10 applicants whose parents have no college experience are still able to navigate the college admissions process.

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**Figure 3. Rates of enrolling in any college or university (2 or 4-year) anytime in six years following application**
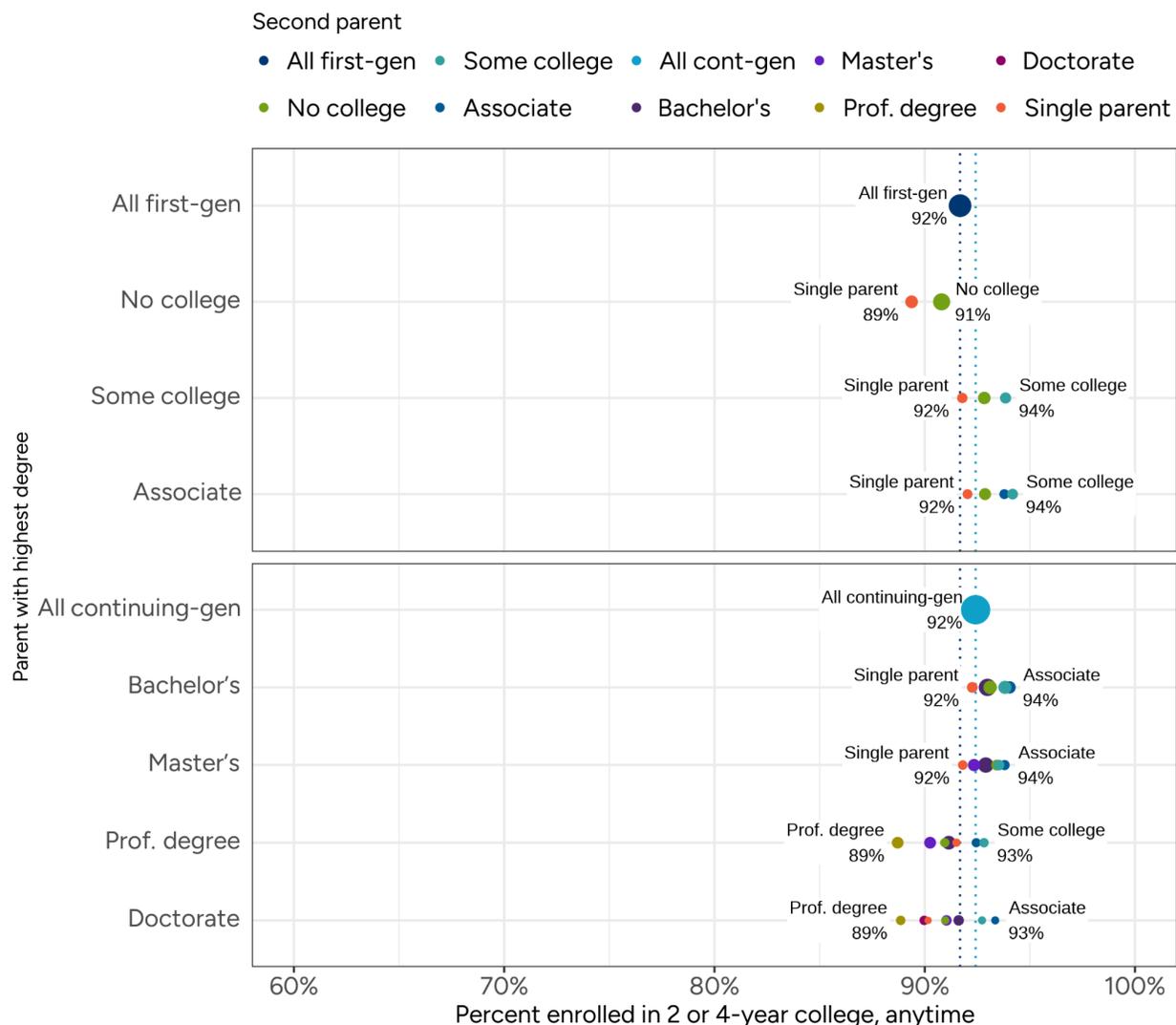
Differences emerge, however, when we focus on enrollments to 4-year institutions, particularly enrollments "on-time", the Fall following submitting a Common App application, as shown in Figure 4. Enrollment rates range from 65% (single parent, no college) to 86% (Bachelor's and Master's degree), a ~20 percentage point range.

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Figure 4. Rates of enrolling in a 4-year university in Fall 2017
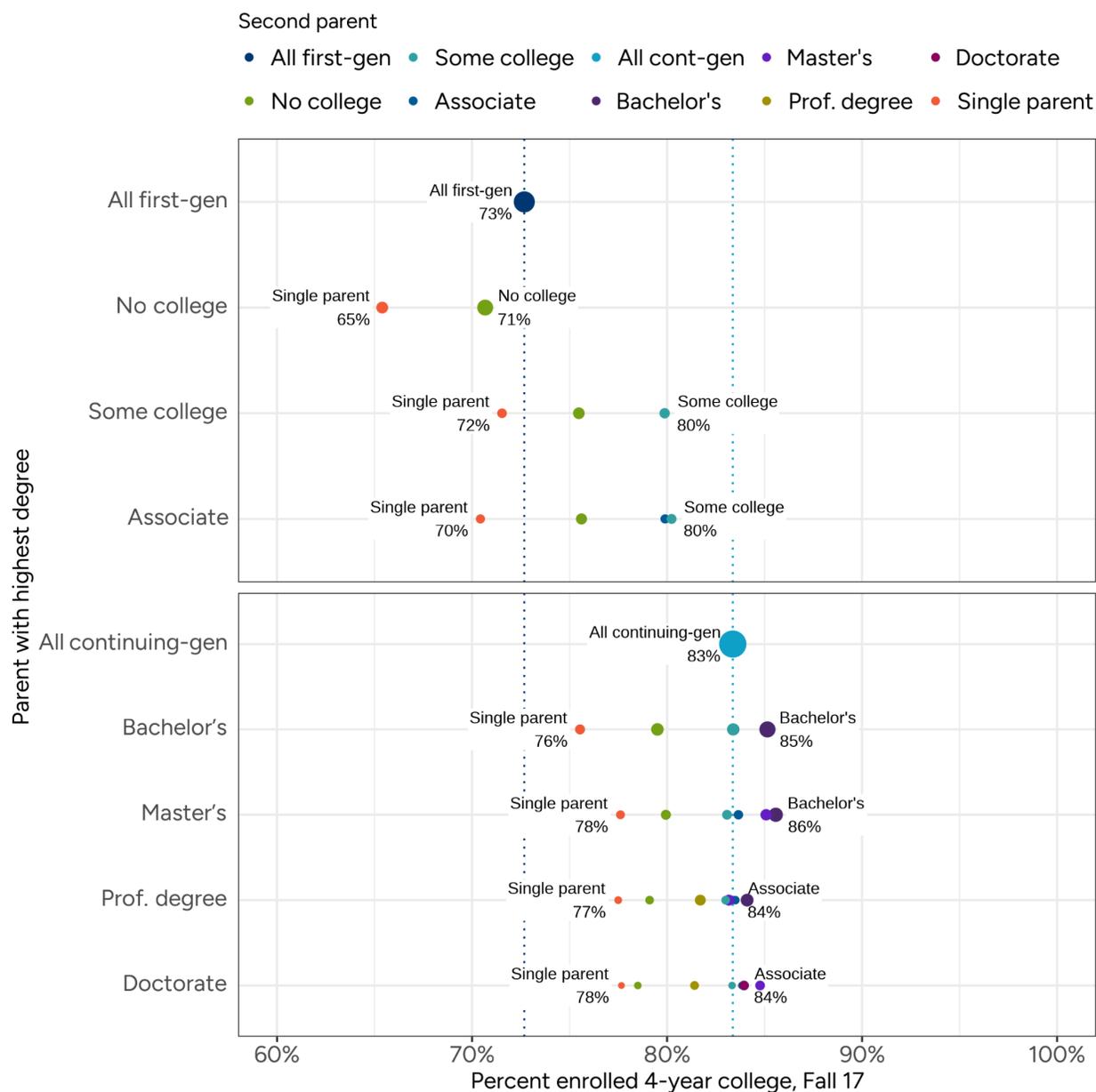
As we examine enrolling in a four-year institution, persisting once enrolled, and completing a degree, we observe a consistent order of parental education outcomes, with overlapping outcomes for the upper end of first-generation and lower end of continuing-generation. For narrative clarity, we assign four labels to these consistent groupings of parent education outcomes.

- **"Striving":** First-generation students reporting a single-parent and those reporting two parents with no college experience enroll in 4-year institutions in the Fall following application at rates around 65-72%

- - Note that for persistence and completion (Figures 5-7), two parent households with no college experience switch to join the "Emerging" grouping below.

- **"Emerging":** Continuing-generation applicants from single-parent households AND first-generation applicants with two parents with limited college experience enroll at rates ranging from 76-78%

- **"Advancing":** First-generation applicants with two parents who both have at least some college experience, and continuing-generation applicants with a second parent below a Bachelor's degree, enroll at rates ranging from 80-83%.

- **"Established":** Continuing-generation applicants with two Bachelor's educated parents or higher have enrollment rates only slightly higher than "Advancing" applicants, around 83-86%.

Ultimately, enrollment rates are relatively continuous, increasing alongside **both** parents' degree attainment. Take for example, three types of applicants whose highest degree parent has a Bachelor's degree, shown on the second line of the continuing-generation chart in Figure 4: those reporting one parent (76%, orange), those with a second parent with no college experience (79%, green) and those with two parents with a Bachelor's degree (85%).

What could drive these differences despite all these applicants having at least one parent who could share their experience and advice enrolling, and graduating? While we cannot determine what exactly drives the association between parent education combinations and enrolling in a 4-year program on-time, it's worth revisiting our prior research on applicants' pre-college characteristics. The range of enrollment rates echo a range of fee-waiver eligibility, often used as a proxy for low-income status,[8] (52%, 32%, and just 10% for dual-bachelor's degree parents), and we observe similar ranges when examining community characteristics, for example the percent of adults in an applicant's ZIP code with a Bachelor's degree or higher. In short, our findings suggest that having two parents with high degrees is associated with an intersection of socio-economic characteristics, including family economic resources, social capital, and neighborhood characteristics, that are also associated with higher enrollment rates.

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[8]More information on fee-waiver eligibility criteria are available online.

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Persistence once enrolled in 4-year institutions

Next, we follow applicants enrolled in a 4-year institution in Fall 2017 as they progress through college and complete degrees. The six years following enrollment reveal two clear patterns. First, differences by detailed parent education start when examining which applicants remain enrolled in their second year of college, and continue to grow each following year. Secondly, the relative order of parental education combinations, which groups have almost universal success and which groups have higher attrition, mostly matches the pattern shown in four-year on-time enrollment, with first-generation applicants reporting one parent showing strikingly lower rates of persistence and completion.

Figure 5 shows the percent of enrolled applicants who persisted or earned a Bachelor's degree in each year following enrollment, among applicants enrolled in a 4-year institution in Fall 2017. Gaps between first-generation and continuing-generation status expand each year, though persistence rates overlap between the upper end of first-generation and lower end of continuing-generation. At the lower end of first-generation, the three first-generation single parent combinations fall almost 10 percentage points lower than the first-generation average. Appendix Figures A2-A4 show each year's outcomes in greater detail.
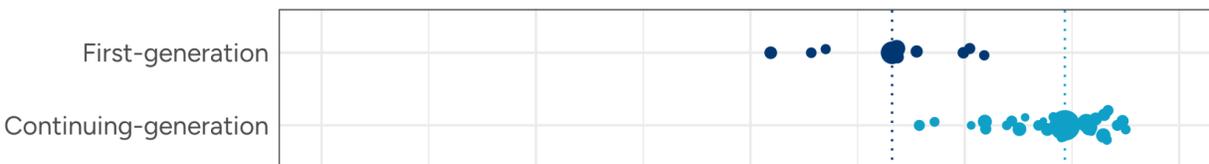
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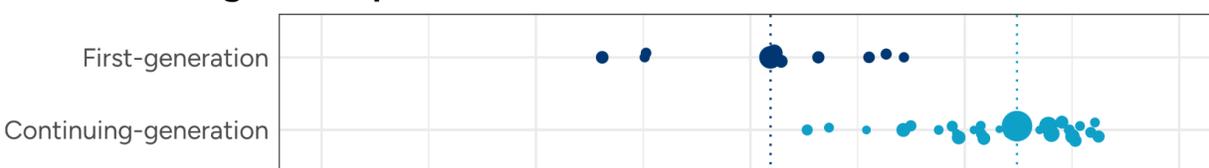February 23, 2026

Figure 5. Persistence by parent-education combination and first-generation status

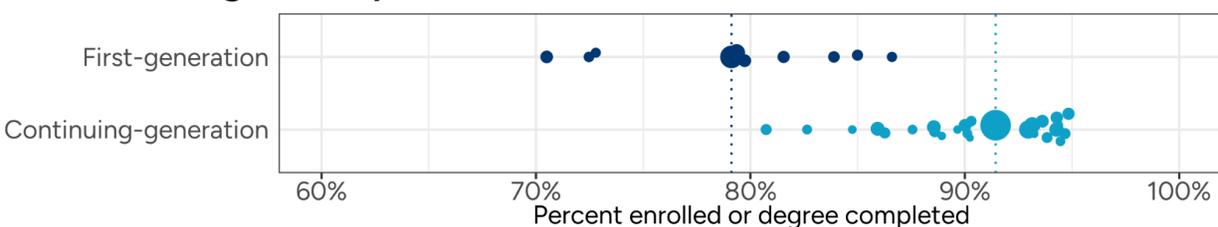Among applicants enrolled in 4-year institution, Fall 2017

Enrolled Year 2

Enrolled or degree completed Year 3

Enrolled or degree completed Year 4

Percent enrolled or degree completed

Degree completion

Six years after enrolling, the percent of applicants who have earned a Bachelor's degree varies substantially across parental education combinations, echoing and expanding the variation we observed in enrollment and persistence. Figure 6 shows this range of completion rates within traditional first and continuing-generation groups. The wide range of outcomes on each line shows that the standard first-generation definition groups together students with a 58% completion rate alongside those with 78% rate, a 20-point range in outcomes that likely reflects different college experiences shaped by differences in parent resources. Similarly, continuing-generation degree completion rates span between 70% and 92%, a 22-percentage point range. The first-generation parent education combinations with the highest completion rates overlap with the lower range of continuing-generation rates.

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Figure 6. Range of 6-year Bachelor's degree completion rates
Among applicants enrolled in a 4-year institution, Fall 2017

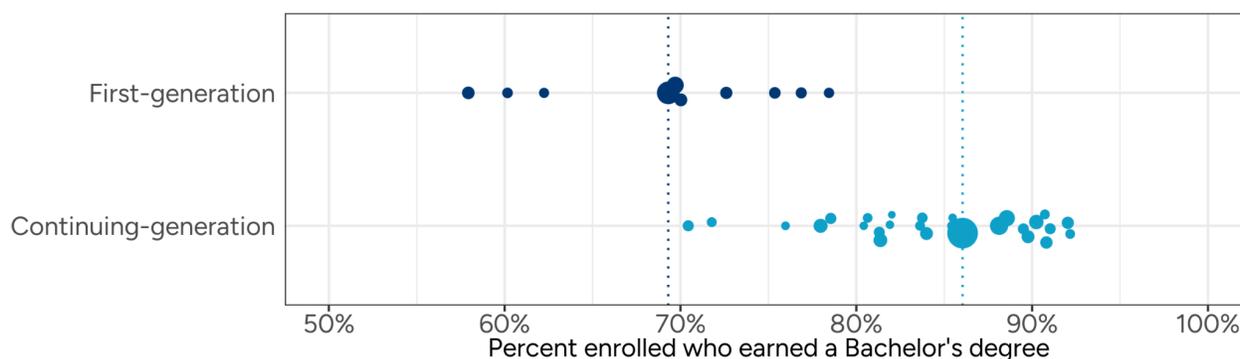Percent enrolled who earned a Bachelor's degree

Figure 7 provides more detailed comparisons of degree completion rates. We again observe the same rough order of parent education combinations.

- **"Striving":** First-generation students from single-parent households. As with persistence, this group has completion rates 8-12 percentage points lower than the lower end of the "emerging" range, with 58-62% completing degrees within 6 years. These applicants clearly experience distinct barriers once enrolled in 4-year programs.

- **"Emerging":** Continuing-generation applicants from single-parent households AND first-generation applicants with two parents with no or limited college experience. Strikingly, students with a single parent with a Bachelor's degree have similar outcomes to applicants with two parents with no college history (~70%).

- **"Advancing":** First-generation applicants with two parents who both have at least some college experience, AND continuing-generation applicants with a second parent below a Bachelor's degree. This group has a range of completion rates, from 75-85%, blending upward from "Emerging" students.

- **"Established":** Continuing-generation applicants with two Bachelor's educated parents or higher. These groups complete at rates of 88% up to 92%. The markedly higher outcomes for this group suggest that both parents' education is consequential to the applicant's college experience.

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Figure 7. Six-year Bachelor's degree completion rates
Among applicants enrolled in a 4-year institution, Fall 2017
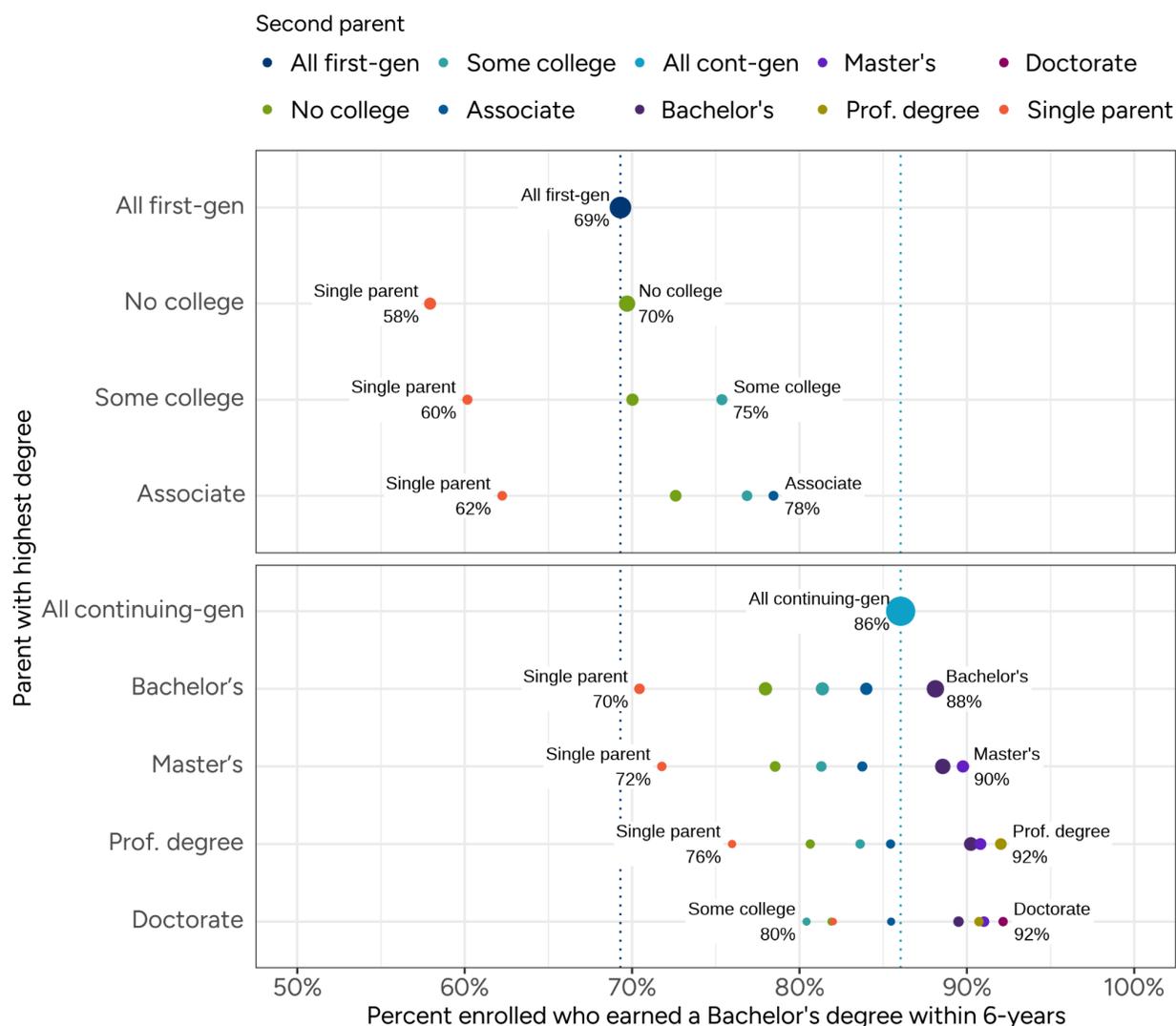
Completion rates vary considerably within each parent's highest degree category. For example, there is an 18 percentage point range for applicants whose highest parent degree is a Bachelor's, from 70% earning degrees for applicants reporting one parent with a Bachelor's up to 88% of applicants with dual Bachelor's parents. Completion rates for applicants with at least one parent with a Master's degree also range over 18 percentage points (72%-90%).

Why does an applicant's degree completion appear so strongly tied to their parents' experiences in higher education? As we show in a prior research brief, the degree completion differences between first and continuing-generation applicants are smaller but still present when we restrict analysis to applicants with strong pre-college academic records. We find the same pattern when examining

differences by parent education combinations among applicants with strong academic records, though small numbers of applicants in these dual categories prevent a full exploration in this brief. Ultimately, the same intersecting factors we point to when considering enrollment likely again play a role in staying enrolled and completing degrees: economic resources, social capital, and other associated factors.

Conclusion

This research brief underscores an emerging pattern in Common App's research exploring first-generation status, and post-application outcomes more broadly. First-generation Common App applicants are by and large enrolling in college, though differences emerge when examining on-time 4-year college enrollment specifically. Gaps between first and continuing-generation applicants, and the continuum of parent education combinations within those categories, grow larger after enrollment, as students try to persist over two, three, four or more years and complete Bachelor's degrees.

Definitional choices, including breaking down the traditional binary into parental education combinations as we do here, or even restricting to applicants with strong pre-college academic records, or who are not eligible for a fee-waiver as we considered in our last research brief, reveal some variation in average outcomes, but do not fundamentally alter this narrative. Each analysis captures a partial snapshot of a larger and more complicated reality: parent education is associated with — but not determinative of — an applicant's knowledge of the college-going process, family economic resources, neighborhood, school environment, academic performance, and myriad other important experiences, and these in turn are associated with — but not determinative of — an applicant's college outcomes.

Yet every year, the number of first-generation college applicants using Common App continues to grow, and each applicant brings their own irreducible experiences and achievements to college. We hope that these applicants' many supporters, including teachers, counselors, high schools, colleges, scholarship programs, support programs, policy makers and more, can use our research to inform their own work.

The exact patterns we share concerning Common App applicants can look different at specific high schools, colleges, states, and other student populations. The importance of nuances within first-generation definitions may vary with the question being asked. We offer a few guiding considerations for organizations considering first-generation status in their own work, based on our findings here.

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First, traditional first-generation definitions still offer helpful insight, especially when gathering more detailed information about students is difficult. Despite overlapping outcomes in the middle, the traditional first-generation definition still identifies the students most likely to experience challenges.

For organizations interested in further unpacking parent education, the next step could be noting students with a single parent or with limited contact to a second parent, monitoring their outcomes and considering eligibility for additional support. We find that students who report just one parent, who has no or limited college experience ("Striving"), are most at-risk of dropping out and not completing a degree. When support program capacity is limited, this additional information may help prioritize support within first-generation status students. Conversely, programs with broader resources to offer may consider expanding offerings beyond traditional first-generation status. Indeed, we found applicants reporting a single parent with a Bachelor's degree have outcomes more similar to many first-generation students ("Emerging").

Finally, when possible, getting information about both parents' education may be helpful for programs able to serve a broader group of students. Applicants who are continuing-generation but whose second parent does not have a Bachelor's degree or higher still appear to encounter challenges compared to dual-Bachelor's degree plus households, particularly in degree completion ("Advancing").

First-generation status is a created construct, one that can feel inadequate to the complexities of real student experiences. Yet its creation emerged from a real desire among student supporters to name, measure and advocate for students who had been overlooked and underrecognized in higher education. Common App will continue to leverage its data warehouse to inform the higher education community in asking challenging questions and continuing to expand equity for first-generation applicants and many other student populations.

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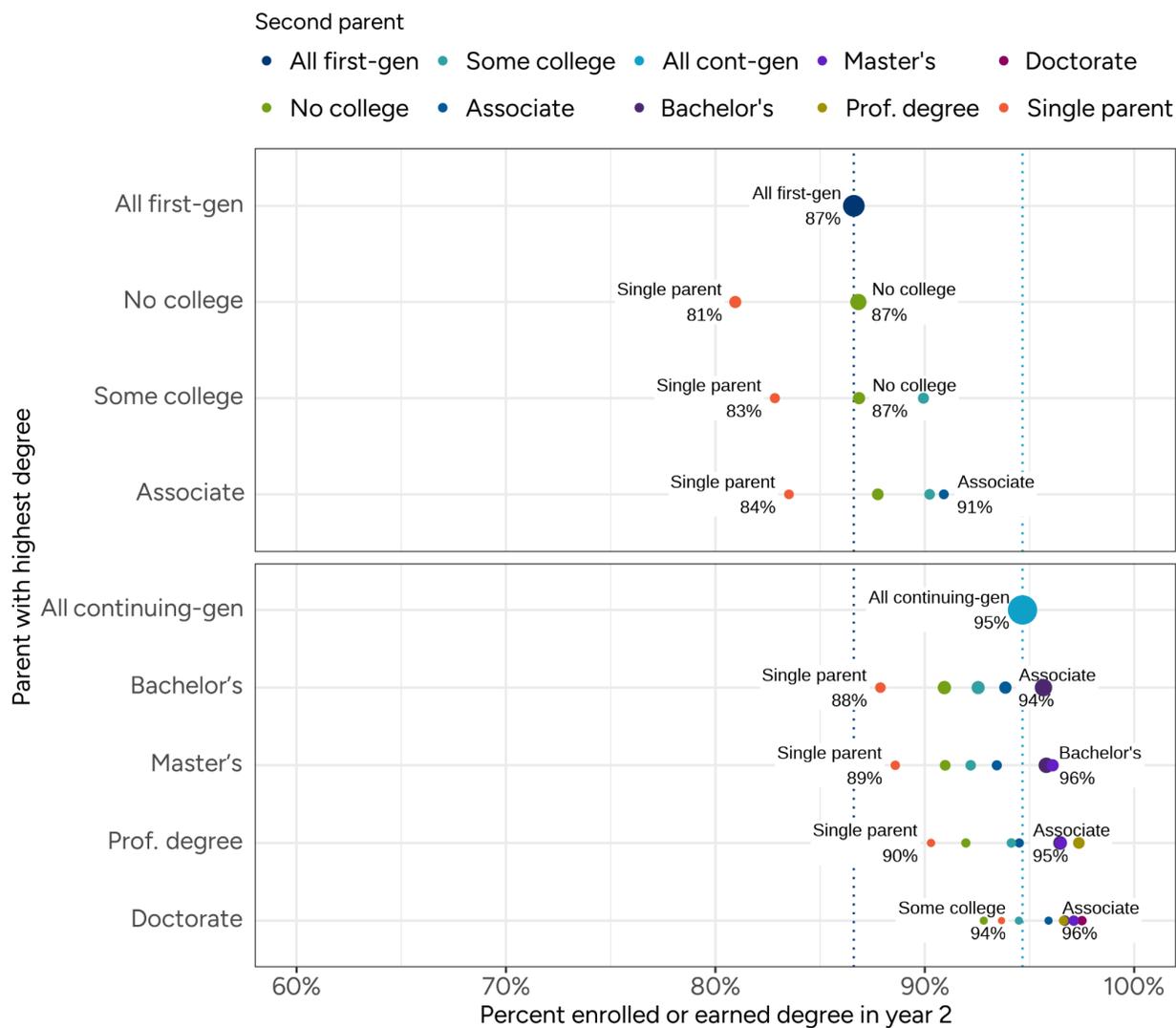February 23, 2026

Appendix

Figure A1. Rates of enrolling in 4-year institution anytime in six years following application
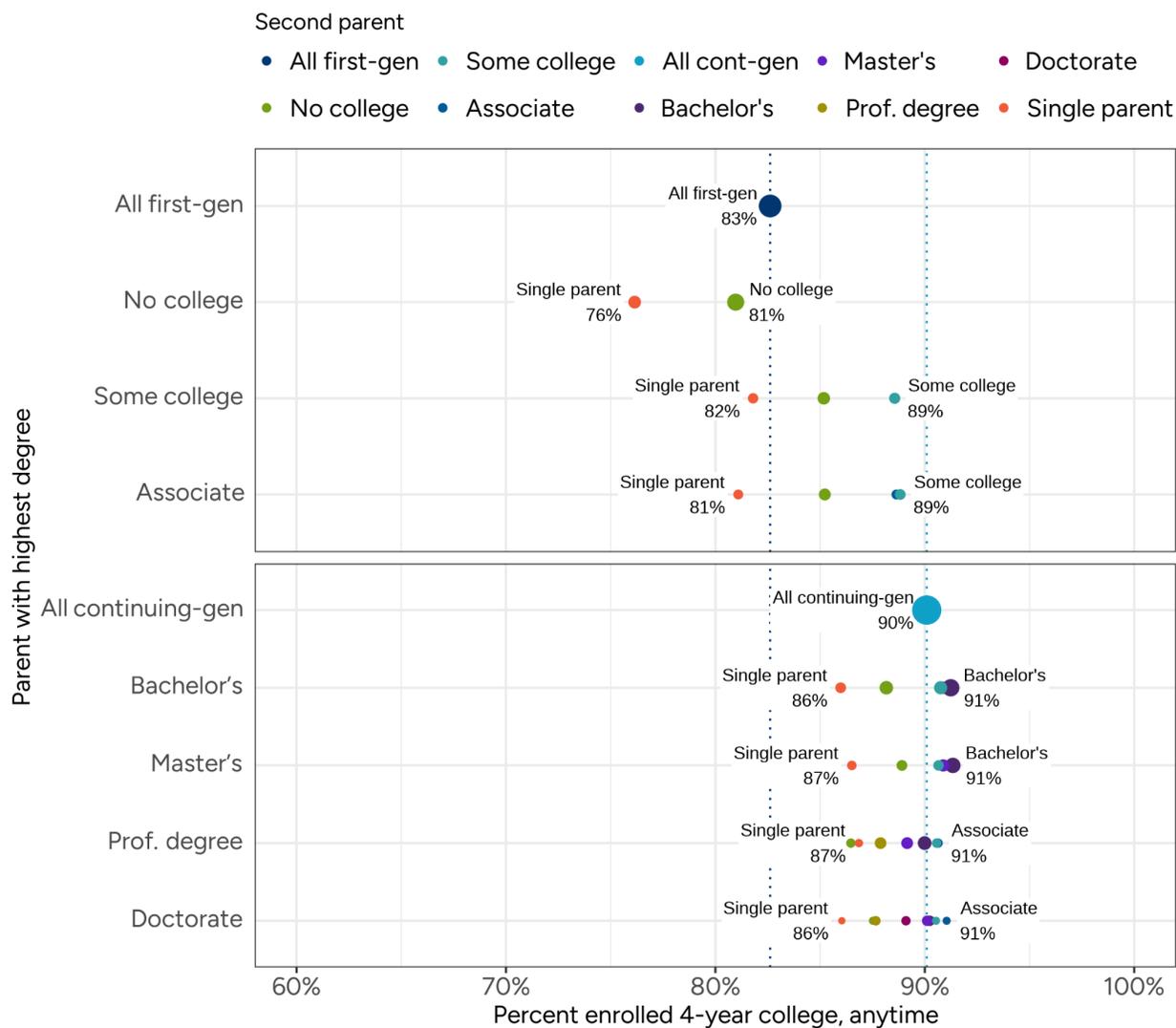
First-generation status in context, part 5:
Enrollment, persistence, and degree completion by detailed parental education
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Figure A2. Rates of remaining enrolled or completing a Bachelor's degree, Year 2
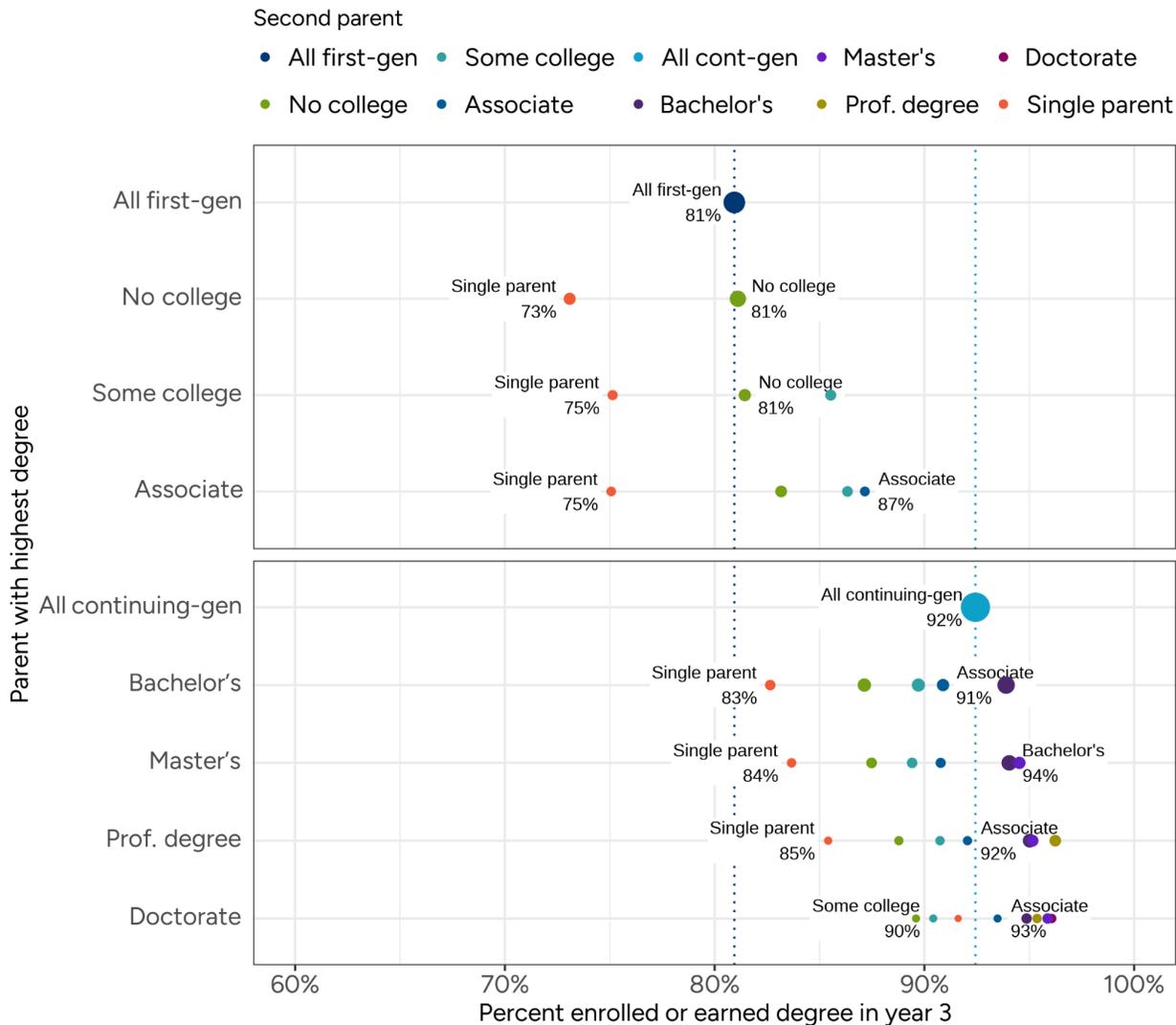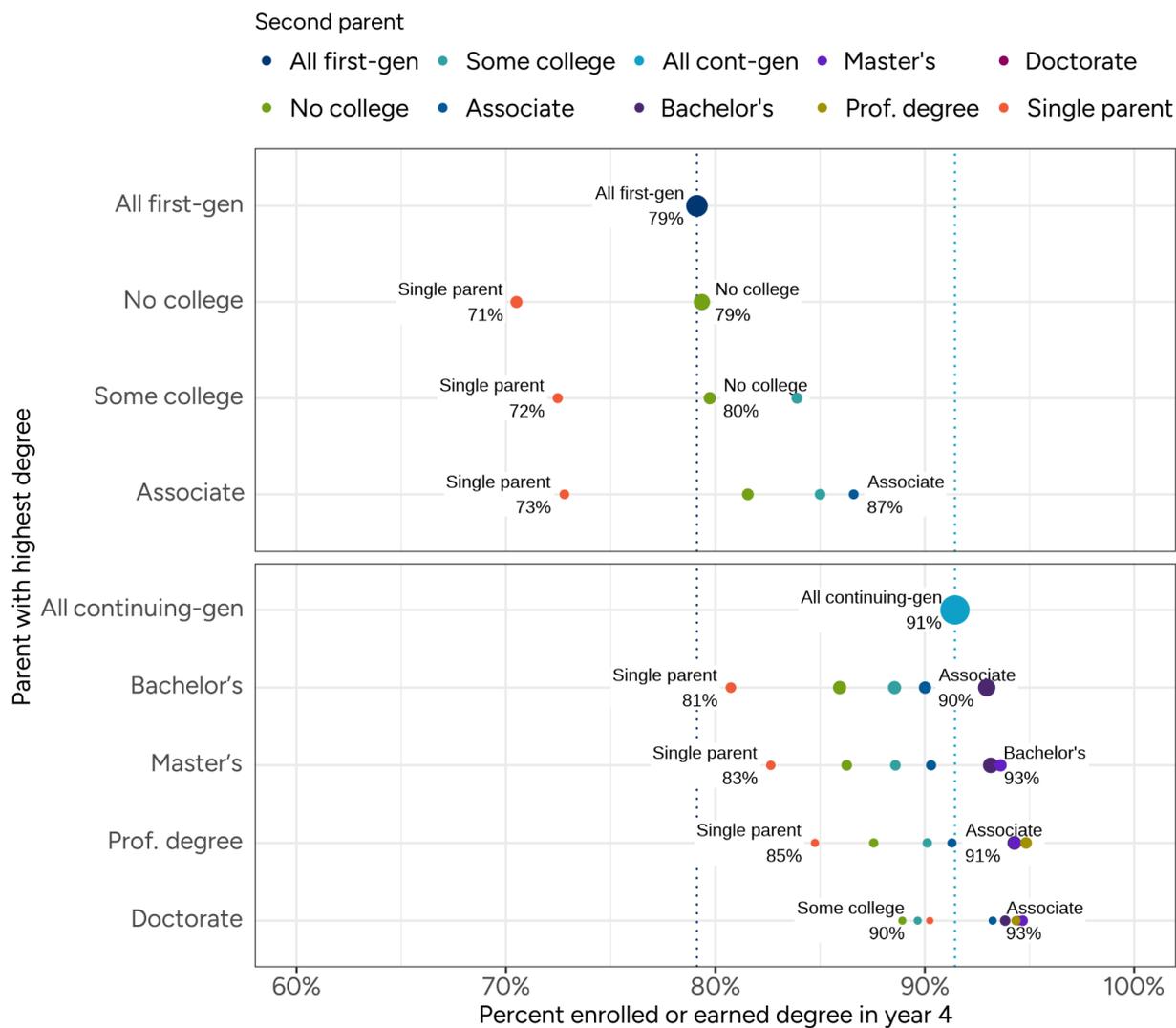
Figure A3. Rates of remaining enrolled or completing a Bachelor's degree, Year 3

First-generation status in context, part 5:
Enrollment, persistence, and degree completion by detailed parental education
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Figure A4. Rates of remaining enrolled or completing a Bachelor's degree, Year 4

First-generation status in context, part 5:
Enrollment, persistence, and degree completion by detailed parental education
February 23, 2026