

Early Returns: Reversing Enrollment Declines in Massachusetts Community Colleges through MassReconnect

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OVERVIEW

When Massachusetts launched its MassReconnect program in August 2023, it made a bold bet: that removing financial barriers could bring thousands of adults back to the classroom and reshape the state's workforce. The initiative guaranteed free community college tuition to any Massachusetts resident aged 25 or older—a demographic the state saw as having untapped potential. Community college enrollment had been declining across all age groups throughout the 2010s and the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving campuses with empty seats and Massachusetts facing critical labor shortages in healthcare and other key industries.

The policy's design reflected its ambitions. MassReconnect specifically targeted nontraditional students: adults who had started college but never finished, or who had never enrolled at all. The program operates as a last-dollar scholarship, covering any tuition and fees not covered by other financial aid sources and providing a stipend for books and supplies.¹ Students were eligible if they had not yet completed an associate or bachelor's degree and if they enrolled in at least six credit hours per semester. While eligibility and funding amounts were nuanced, the public messaging around the program was not; free community college for anyone 25 years or older. The program aimed to boost both enrollment and completion rates while addressing workforce needs and expanding economic opportunities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Dramatic increases in enrollment both for the initial target population (25+) as well as overall.
- These increases are especially large (21% in 2023) because they account for projected declines based on prior years' data.
- These enrollment increases are notably larger (3x greater) from enrollment changes in other Northeast states.
- Consistent increases across program area, race/ethnicity, gender and campuses, with the majority (71%) of MassReconnect students enrolled part-time rather than full-time.
- The majority (83%) of MassReconnect funds went to Pell-ineligible students, even though the policy attracted substantial numbers of new Pell-eligible students, generating \$7.4 million in additional federal grant aid to Massachusetts students in 2023.
- While MassReconnect recipients showed higher persistence than non-recipients, overall system-wide persistence rates remained unchanged despite the sizeable enrollment increases.

Overall, findings suggest that MassReconnect and MassEducate meaningfully increased access and enrollment in community colleges beyond historical and national trends and are reshaping the age and income composition of the student body across campuses statewide.

Initial signs proved promising enough that state leaders doubled down. Buoyed by early reports of increased community college enrollment, Massachusetts increased the MassReconnect allocation to \$24 million for FY 2025 and introduced MassEducate, which extended free community college to students under 25—effectively making community college free for all Massachusetts residents. The state budget allocated \$93.5 million for MassEducate’s inaugural school year—a substantial investment reflecting both the policy’s early momentum and the state’s commitment to expanding access.

This report examines the effects of MassReconnect and MassEducate during the 2023–24 and 2024–25 academic years. The analysis adds depth to the state’s early encouraging enrollment figures, nuance to our understanding of who is benefiting from the policy, and initial evidence on students’ retention and persistence rates.

ENROLLMENT INCREASES

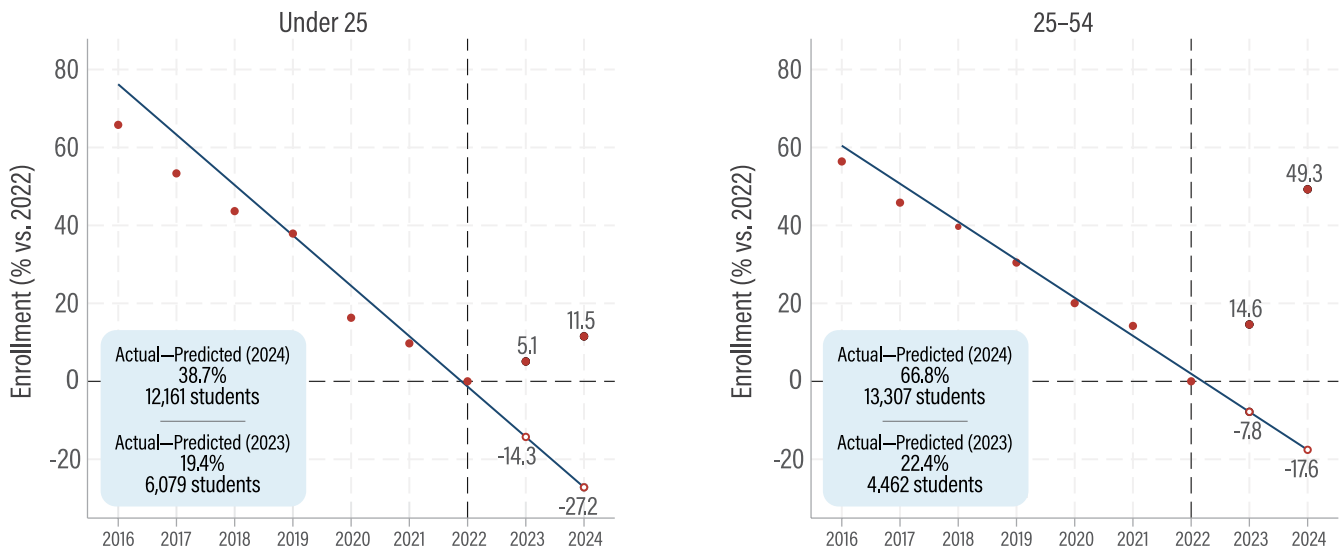
In Fall 2023, about 56,000 individuals enrolled in a Massachusetts community college, over 4,000 more than in Fall 2022. These increases were monitored and released publicly by the Department of Higher Education (DHE) early in the policy’s implementation and were covered extensively in re-

gional media. Our analysis adds to an understanding of these increases by situating the raw enrollment figures within the context of a longer-term decline in enrollment. By comparing actual Fall 2023 enrollments to what would have been projected without a large-scale intervention like MassReconnect, we observe even more profound effects. Fall 2023 community college enrollment was 10,907 students, higher than projected based on historical trends—a 21% increase above trend and more than double the raw enrollment increase of 4,000 students.

This trend continues in Fall 2024 (overall enrollment increase of 50% or 26,000 more students), though we are unable to disentangle increases generated by the second year of MassReconnect implementation versus the addition of the MassEducate investments. For this reason, the remainder of the data focuses on the Fall 2023 enrollment spikes, though as demonstrated in the figures below, enrollment figures in all cases experience an even larger bump in the Fall of 2024.

Figure 1 displays fall semester enrollment for two age groups: those under 25 years old, and those who are 25 and older and eligible for MassReconnect scholarships.² Students 25 and older exceeded projected enrollment by 4,462 students, a 22% increase relative to trend. There are also increases, though smaller, for those under age 25, suggesting the policy

Figure 1: Overall Community College Enrollment by Age Group



Note: Dotted lines represent projected enrollment based on 2016–2022 trends. The shaded area shows students aged 25+ who are eligible for MassReconnect. Fall 2023 actual enrollment exceeded projections for students under 25 by 6,079 students and with students 25+ exceeding projections by 4,462.

may have induced a broader population of students to enroll in community college. These increases relative to trend were even larger in the second year, when MassEducate began. Enrollment in 2024 for those under 25 was 39% (over 12,000 students) above trend, while those 25 and older saw enrollment increases of 67% (over 13,000 students) relative to trend.

First-time enrollees displayed similar patterns in the first year of MassReconnect: overall new student enrollment surpassed projections by 4,572 students. New students aged 25 and older exceeded projections by 65%, representing an additional 2,064 individuals. In addition to new individuals enrolling, we observe increases in returning students as well as in the number of overall credits enrollees were taking. Such patterns continued or grew during the second year.

The enrollment gains observed in the first year of MassReconnect and then later with MassEducate also appear consistent with increases observed in other states that have introduced reconnect-style programs (Michigan) or broader free-community college initiatives (Tennessee and Oregon).³

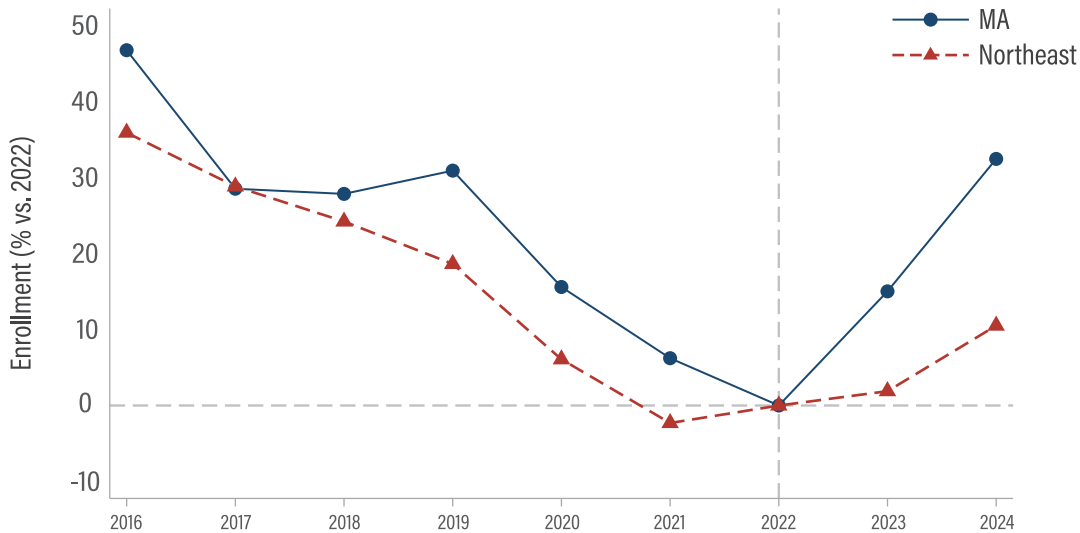
Importantly, further analysis revealed there was no corresponding decline in enrollment in the public four-year sector, meaning that MassReconnect does not appear to be (at least

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in this early stage) diverting students from four-year college enrollment. This finding contrasts with other free community college programs such as Oregon Promise, where the policy was explicitly targeting recent high school graduates and shifted enrollment away from 4-year institutions in its first year (Gurantz, 2020).

Prior to the implementation of MassReconnect, Massachusetts and neighboring Northeastern states displayed a similar downward trend in community college enrollment. Figure 2 displays a sharp increase in enrollment trends starting in

Figure 2: Massachusetts Community College Enrollment relative to other Northeast States



Note: Enrollment indexed to 2022 levels (2022=0). Massachusetts (blue line) shows sharp divergence from Northeast regional trends (red-dotted line) following MassReconnect’s August 2023 announcement. By 2024, Massachusetts enrollment was 32.4 percentage points above the 2022 baseline compared to 10.5 percentage points for the Northeast region, representing a 21.9 percentage point difference. Northeast includes Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

the 2023–24 academic year for Massachusetts. Following MassReconnect’s implementation, Massachusetts’ enrollment growth substantially exceeded regional trends. In 2023, Massachusetts enrollment increased 15.0 percentage points above the 2022 baseline compared to just 1.9 percentage points in the Northeast—a 13.1 percentage point difference. By 2024, this gap widened to 21.9 percentage points, with Massachusetts at 32.4 percentage points above baseline versus the Northeast’s 10.5 percentage points. Massachusetts’ growth rate was approximately three times that of neighboring states, suggesting that state policy moves drove meaningful enrollment increases beyond broader regional recovery trends.

ENROLLMENT DRIVERS

Figure 3 displays demographic characteristics of students who received MassReconnect compared to all non-recipients in the fall semester of 2023. There are no meaningful differences by either gender or race/ethnicity between the two groups. Consistent with the policy’s eligibility criteria, MassReconnect recipients were older than non-recipients.

Separate analysis also revealed that enrollment trends were largely consistent across degree type and course subject area (see appendix figures). While the average number of credits taken is also similar, a meaningful

Figure 3: Characteristics of MassReconnect Recipients relative to Non-Recipients

	Fall 2023 MassReconnect Recipient	Fall 2023 Non-Recipient
Average Age	34.5	26.9
% Female	65%	62%
% Black	14%	15%
% White	47%	42%
% Hispanic (any race)	24%	25%
% Asian	5%	5%
% First-time enrollee	57%	43%
Average Number of Credits Taken	8.7	9.4
% Continuing or graduating	62%	45%
Average EFC	\$11,226	\$5,517
Average Total Financial Aid Award	\$3,743	\$1,358
Number of students	6,150	70,485

Note: EFC (Expected Family Contribution) is calculated only for students who completed a FAFSA or MASFA. Continuation rate measures students who either re-enrolled in 2024–25 or graduated.

PELL-ELIGIBILITY

The Federal Pell Grant Program awards need-based aid to expand lower- and middle-income students’ access to postsecondary education. Eligibility for a Pell Grant is based on the student’s dependency status, family size, student and/or parent adjusted gross income (AGI), and state of residence. Pell Grants are available to eligible students with an AGI up to 400% of the federal poverty line.

In Massachusetts community colleges, 95% of students receiving Pell Grants have an AGI of \$71,000 or less and live in ZIP codes with a median income of \$138,397, which represents the 58th percentile of household income in the state.

Pell Grants serve as the foundation of financial aid and tend to be the first and largest source of support for eligible students. Analysis from this report suggests that MassReconnect and MassEducate, as last-dollar programs, may have enticed more students to enroll in community colleges even when Pell dollars ultimately became their primary source of support. Our analysis includes students with full and partial support provided through the Pell program.

Any changes to federal policy governing the Pell program will likely affect the future distribution of state-to-federal aid provided to these targeted students.

share (71.6%) of MassReconnect recipients were enrolled part-time relative to non-recipients. While this enrollment pattern may be explained in part due to the work and family obligations of a more adult population, importantly, this part-time enrollment rate is also meaningfully higher even when compared with non-recipients of similar age.

Each individual college campus surpassed predicted enrollment levels by at least 8%. Notably, Roxbury Community College and North Shore Community College had more substantial increases of 71% and 55%, respectively, over projected enrollments.

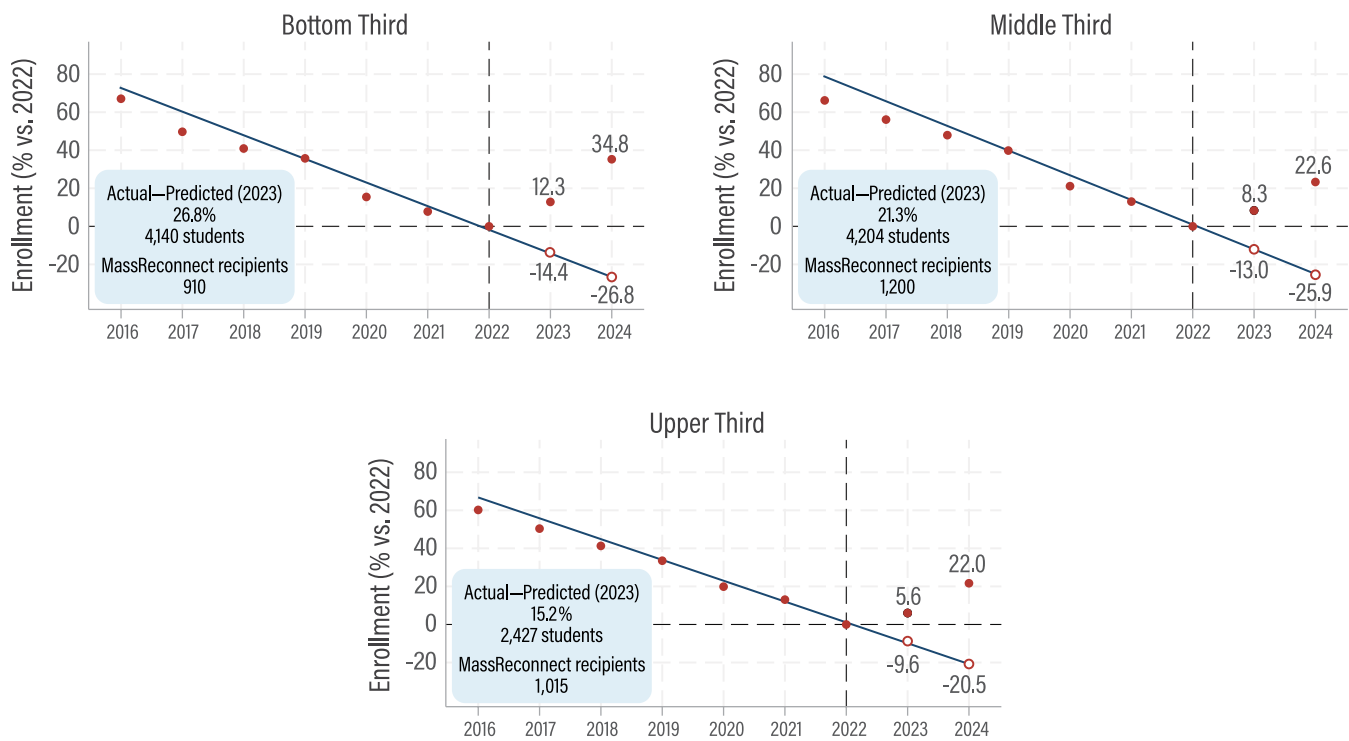
Financial aid data illustrate the stark difference in Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) for students who filled out a FAFSA or MASFA: the average EFC for MassReconnect recipients was twice that of non-recipients. Since only about half (53%) of Massachusetts community college students enrolled in a degree program have completed a FAFSA,⁴ EFC alone cannot fully characterize the financial status of all

new enrollees. Since direct measures of individual students' financial backgrounds are unavailable, median income by ZIP code provides a reliable proxy.

Figure 4 illustrates the changes in enrollment by the median income in students' permanent ZIP codes as listed on their college application. Although MassReconnect scholarship recipients with FAFSA records had higher EFCs, ZIP code median income data reveal the policy attracted students across all income levels.

Students in the lower third of the income distribution experience the largest bump: a 22% increase in enrollment from 2022 levels. The widely publicized policy likely attracted students interested in free community college, and then many of these students would later learn they already qualified for free tuition through Pell Grants or state tuition waivers, making MassReconnect funds unnecessary. Relative to prior trends, we project that this brought in an additional \$7.4 million in federal grant aid to Massachusetts students in 2023.

Figure 4: Community College Enrollment by Median Income



Note: Students grouped into income terciles based on the median household income of their permanent residence ZIP code. Labels show percentage change from Fall 2022 enrollment levels. Lower-income areas experienced the largest relative gains (12% increase), though enrollment grew across all income levels.

DISTRIBUTION OF MASSRECONNECT SCHOLARSHIP DOLLARS

\$1,603 Average awarded per student

\$720
AVERAGE TO
Pell-eligible student

\$2,120
AVERAGE TO
Pell-ineligible student



23.5% of MassReconnect awardees received no other form of aid

83% of MassReconnect funds went to Pell-*ineligible* students

Among students who were eligible but did not receive a MassReconnect scholarship:

72% received a Pell Grant

54% received a need-based tuition waiver and/or Massachusetts cash grant

CONTINUATION & PERSISTENCE

Following the 2023-24 academic year, the number of continuing or graduating students increased substantially from previous years due to the influx of new students under MassReconnect—over 6,000 more students persisted after Fall 2023 compared to Fall 2022.

To measure persistence, we examined students who enrolled in Fall 2023 and tracked whether they continued enrollment in Fall 2024 or graduated by that term. This measure of persistence provides a potential signal of future student success, as early persistence is associated with a higher likelihood of program completion. Future work will continue to monitor longer-term outcomes with additional years of data. This will be especially important as Massachusetts community colleges have a lower six-year graduation rate (35.2%) than the national average (44.3%), making student retention a high priority for the state.

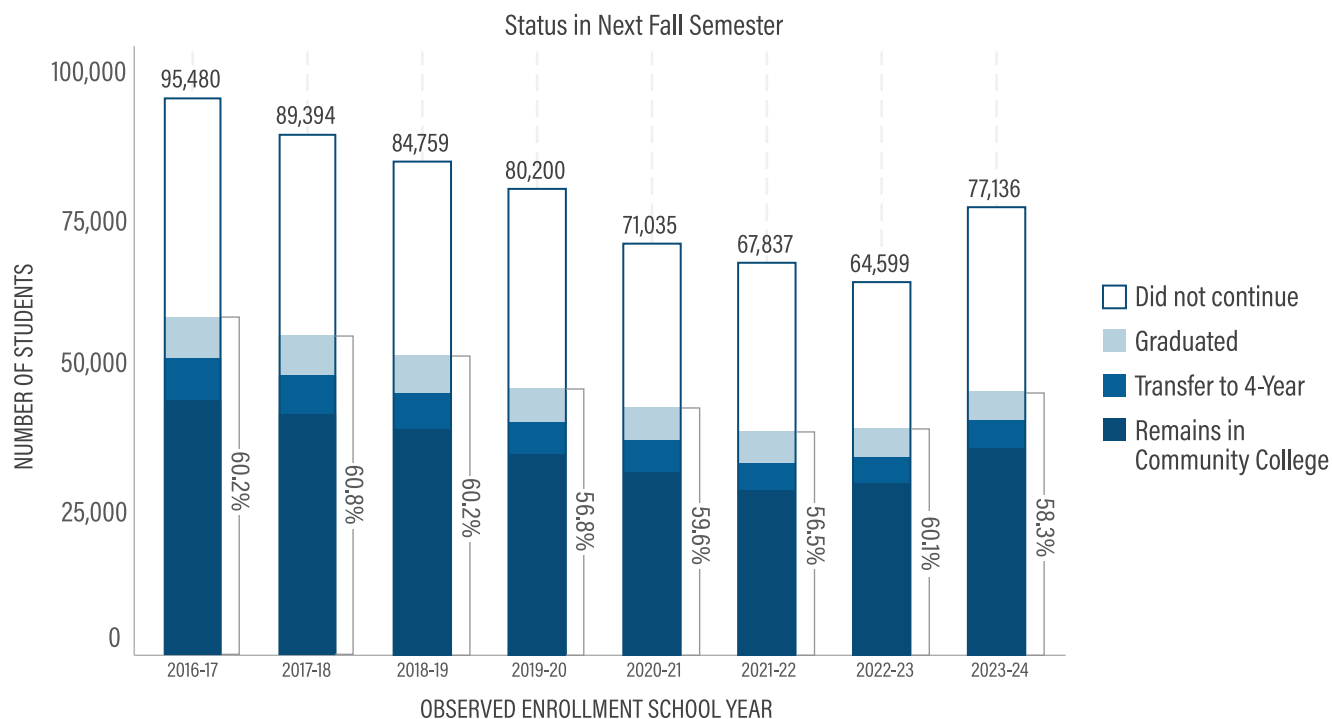
Despite the large increase in the number of persisting students, the overall persistence rate remained relatively constant compared to previous years at approximately 58%, as shown in Figure 5. This pattern is not entirely unexpected given that MassReconnect appears primarily to be designed as an access intervention to bring new students into the community college system, and other state investments (e.g., the SUCCESS program) are targeted more directly to supporting completion. Nevertheless, monitoring whether MassReconnect students persist and complete their degrees remains important for evaluating the policy's long-term

effectiveness. Though MassReconnect clearly drew more students into the community college sector, the lack of increase in persistence rates makes it unclear whether the program successfully improved persistence of enrolled students in this early phase of the program. Even if completion rates remained similar, the policy would still generate a net increase in the number of college-trained adults in the state, which could generate a net benefit on the state investment. More years of data will be necessary to fully understand the impacts of the policy beyond the access gains detailed above.

Further analysis showed that MassReconnect recipients were significantly more likely to continue than other students, with a 62% persistence rate compared to 40% for non-recipients. Differences in the demographic profiles of these two groups make it difficult to determine how much of this difference is due to MassReconnect. Determining long-term persistence, graduation, and transfer rates will require additional years of data.

Analysis of on-time credit accumulation indicated no observed difference between the pre- and initial post-policy periods. On-time credit accumulation means that a full-time student is continually registering for and successfully completing enough classes to finish a degree program in four semesters and is generally a metric strongly associated with program completion. Both currently available student success metrics show little change after MassReconnect.

Figure 5: Persistence of Community College Students



Note: Persistence is measured as the percentage of fall enrollees who either continued to spring semester or graduated. MassReconnect recipients showed higher persistence (62%) compared to non-recipients (40%) and compared to historical averages for all students. The sample includes degree-seeking undergraduate students.

CONCLUSION

MassReconnect achieved its primary initial goal: reversing decades of enrollment decline and bringing thousands of adults into Massachusetts community colleges. When accounting for projected declines based on historical trends, Fall 2023 enrollment exceeded expectations by nearly 11,000 students—more than double the raw increase. This surge stands in contrast to the more modest recovery trends across neighboring northeastern states, strongly suggesting MassReconnect itself may have initiated the turnaround.

The policy successfully attracted students across demographic groups and income levels, with particularly strong gains among lower-income communities. MassReconnect recipients demonstrated higher persistence rates than their peers, and each of the state’s 15 community colleges exceeded projected enrollment levels, with some campuses seeing increases of 50% or more above expectations.

Yet important questions remain. While MassReconnect drew new students into the system and 62% of scholarship recipients were Pell-eligible, 83% of state scholarship funds went to students’ ineligible for federal aid. This difference between the distribution of funds and students seems to have occurred because many lower-income students may have enrolled, anticipating MassReconnect support, but ultimately already qualified for free tuition through existing federal and state programs, meaning state dollars supplemented rather than replaced federal investment for this population. This distribution pattern reflects the policy’s success in expanding access and bringing new students into community college, particularly across all income-levels. Moving forward, policymakers may need to consider how to balance these access gains with strategic deployment of state resources to, for example, enhance supports for low-income students’

persistence and completion. Shifts in federal policy and funding may similarly require state leaders to revisit the sources of sustaining a free-for-all community college initiative, this could include, though would not be limited to, encouraging enrollment in programs known to have especially good labor market returns (e.g., biotech, medical technicians, etc).

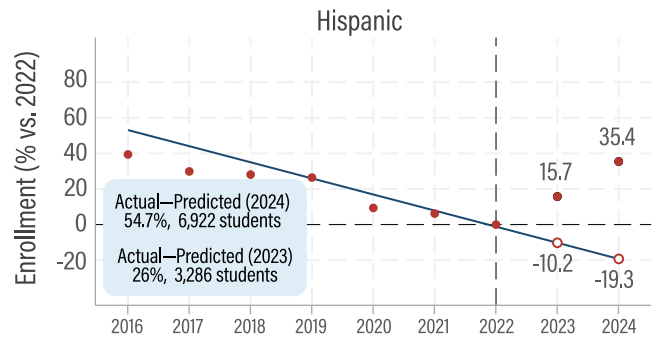
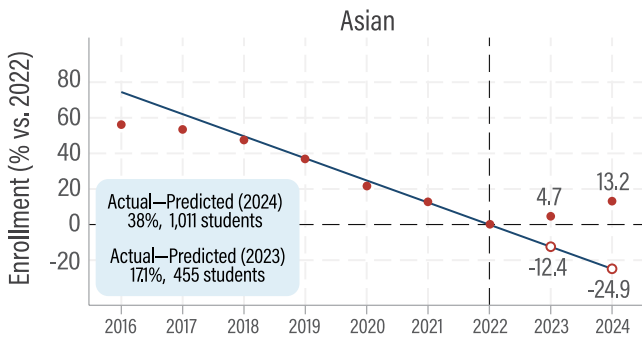
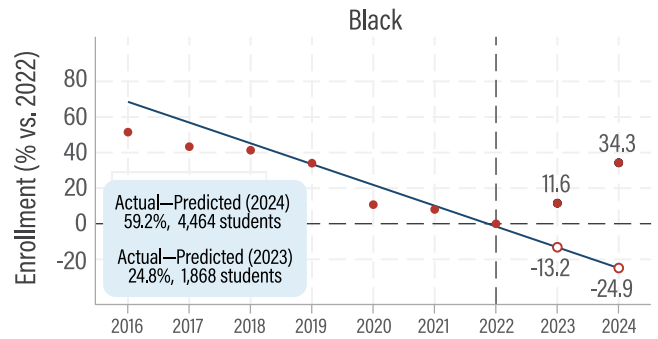
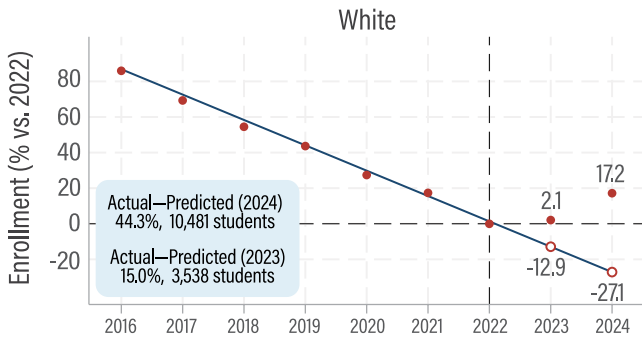
The state's significant investment in marketing and administration of MassReconnect—over \$1.5 million dollars to individual campuses plus a centralized, statewide awareness campaign—may have been as critical as the policy itself. Many students may have entered community college motivated by MassReconnect publicity despite already qualifying for free tuition through other programs. This creates an analytical challenge: we cannot fully disentangle the impact of awareness efforts from the policy itself, though it may suggest that even just making people aware of existing benefits may also be a powerful component of the success of new programs/policies.

Understanding MassReconnect's full impact requires longer-term data on graduation rates, transfer patterns, credential completion in high-demand fields, and most critically, post-graduation employment and wages. For policymakers considering similar initiatives, MassReconnect offers encouraging evidence that free community college can reverse enrollment declines, but the findings also highlight critical design questions around how scholarships interact with existing aid and the potentially important role of public awareness campaigns.

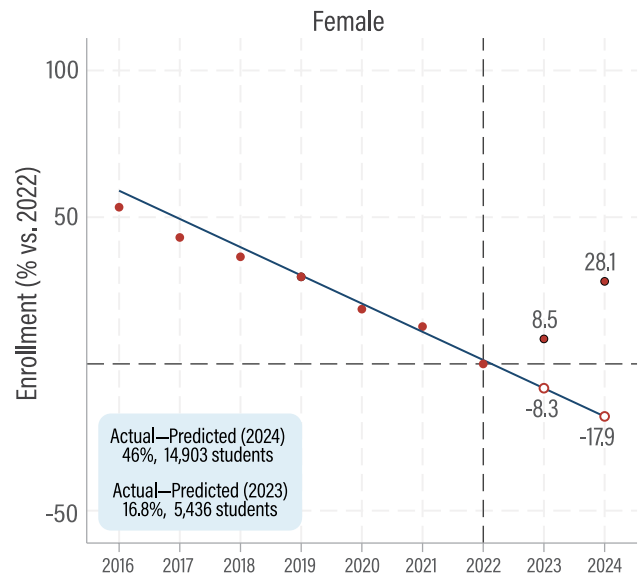
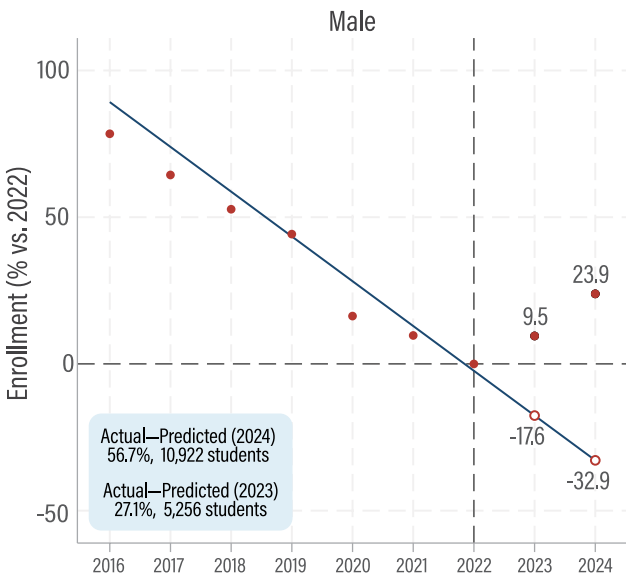
As Massachusetts continues to expand free community college to all residents through MassEducate, continued monitoring will reveal whether these early gains translate into the longer-term outcomes the policy intended to achieve. Through an ongoing research-policy partnership with DHE, we will continue to monitor these trends, particularly persistence patterns, as well as future labor and wage outcomes associated with these state investments.

APPENDIX

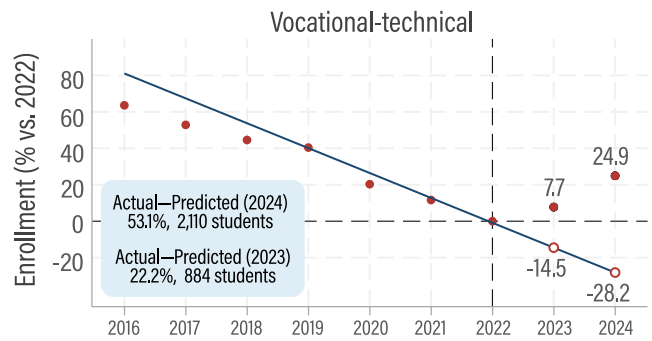
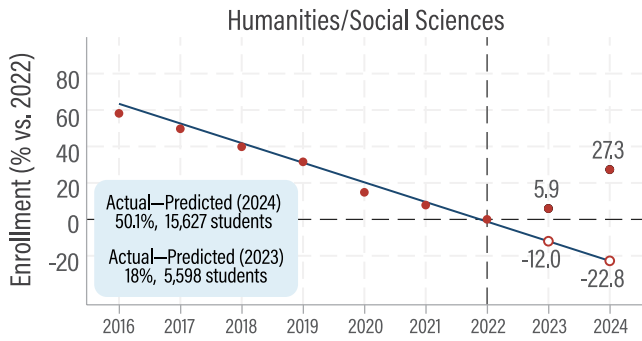
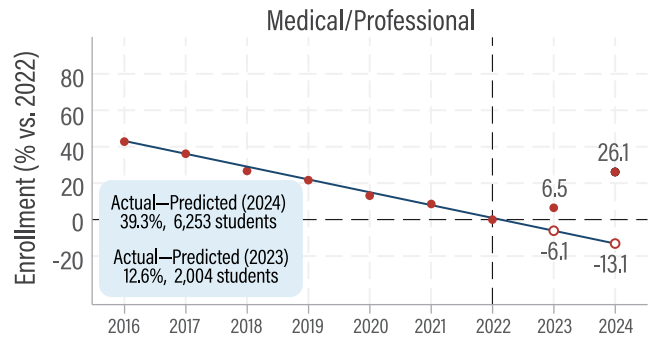
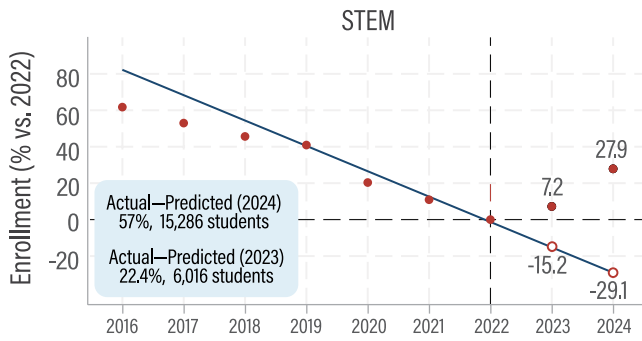
Overall Community College Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



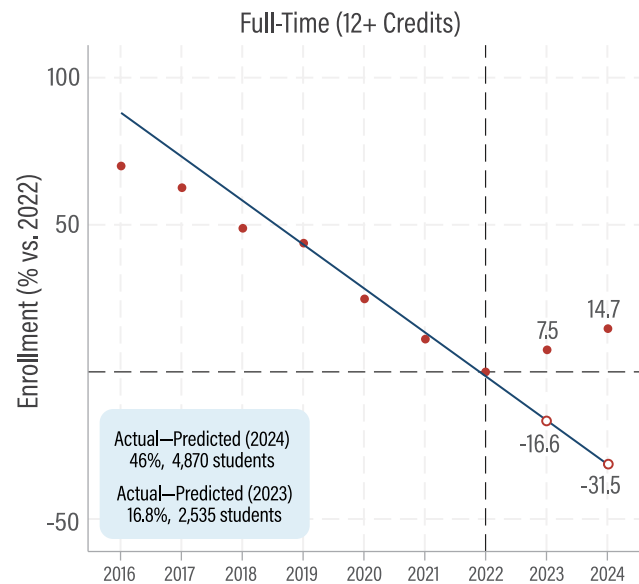
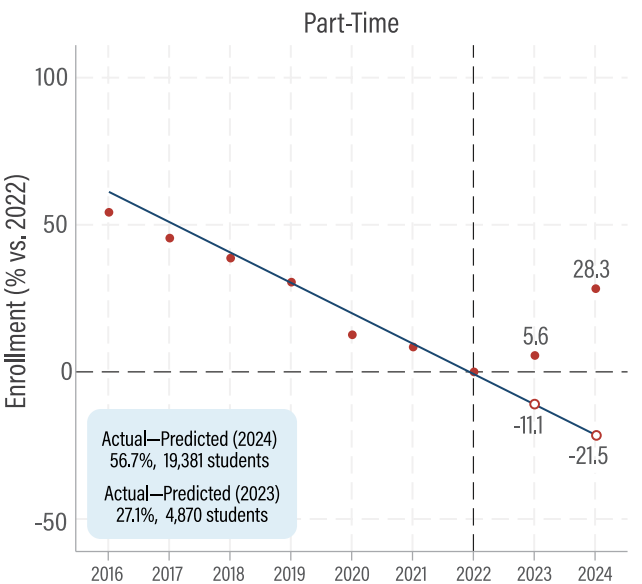
Overall Community College Enrollment by Gender



Overall Community College Enrollment by Subject



Overall Community College Enrollment by Student Status



ENDNOTES

- 1 Full information about eligibility and award amounts, which varied year to year based on available aid, can be found at: mass.edu/osfa/documents/publications/2025/OSFA%202025-2026%20Guidelines/BHE%2026-30b_2025-2026%20MassReconnect%20Guidelines%2011-25-2025.pdf
- 2 Analysis includes students enrolled in degree or certificate programs. Excludes non-degree seeking students, dual enrollment high school students, and students enrolled in exclusively non-credit courses.
- 3 For additional information on evidence from other states see:
Duke, S., & Odle, T. (2025). Does Free College “Work” for Adults? Enrollment Impacts of Michigan Reconnect. Educational Researcher, 0(0). doi.org/10.3102/0013189X251393204
Attridge, J., Carruthers, C. K., & Welch, J. G. (2025, April). Free community college and college completion: Evidence from Tennessee. ckcarruthers.github.io/files/Attridge%20Carruthers%20Welch%202025-04-15.pdf
Gurantz, O. (2020). What does free community college buy? Early impacts from the Oregon Promise. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 39(1), 11-35. doi.org/10.1002/pam.22157
- 4 Includes degree-seeking undergraduate students registered as Massachusetts residents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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