

Institutional Classification Technical Manual

Updated October 10, 2025

Introduction

This document provides further detail on the methodology used for the 2025 Institutional Classification. To access the public data file, which includes the underlying data elements referenced on this page, please visit the [Carnegie Classifications resources page](#).

Purpose of the Institutional Classification

The 2025 Institutional Classification updates and replaces the classification framework historically referenced as the Basic Classification. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education first published the Basic Classification in 1973 to support its research program and subsequently updated it in 1976, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2018, and 2021. The 2025 update shifts to more multidimensional categories that better reflect the breadth and diversity of colleges and universities today.

The Institutional Classification is a descriptive tool that organizes the landscape of American colleges and universities into groupings of similar types of institutions. Historically, the Basic Classification organized most institutions primarily by academic program concentration or the highest degree awarded.

The 2025 Institutional Classification uses a more multidimensional approach, organizing institutions by multiple characteristics to create groups of similar institution types. To make these groups most useful and accurate, we gathered feedback from institutional leaders, researchers, and other users of the classifications about the dimensions and characteristics they would find most helpful and that they use in constructing peer groups. In general, the feedback encouraged us to consider the types of academic programs institutions offer, the types of degrees they award, and the size of institutions. The dimensions also are intended to capture more of the typical or median student experience as opposed to one aspect.

Level of Observation

The classification observes at the UnitID level and follows the reporting structure that institutions use to report to IPEDS.

Data Used

The Carnegie Classifications reflect the higher education sector during a snapshot in time. The 2025 Institutional Classifications are based on a three-year average of data that institutions reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for academic years 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23. Specifically, the classifications used the following data:

- IPEDS 12-Month Enrollment Survey for academic years 2021, 2022, and 2023.
- IPEDS Completions Survey for academic years 2021, 2022, and 2023.

For institutions that merged or otherwise changed organizational structure during the 2020-2023 period, only the data that most accurately reflects the institution during that time period was used. For example, if two institutions merged into a single institution in July 2022, only data from the 2022-23 year was considered. Exceptions and anomalies are noted in the data file. The 2025 Carnegie Classifications do not include changes to institutions after the 2022-23 school year, including mergers, openings, closures, or other changes to the organizational structure.

Appeals Process

Institutions received their data for review on January 16, 2025, with the deadline for appeal on February 28, 2025. Because the classifications rely on publicly available data, prior year revisions that institutions had submitted for their 2023 data were not incorporated.

Following the release of the 2025 Carnegie Classifications in April 2025, institutions were invited to submit appeals, report anomalies, or raise other relevant issues regarding their data, Institutional Classification, or Student Access and Earnings Classification. Following that process, updates to the data and/or classifications were made in October 2025 for a small number of institutions.

Dimensions in the Institutional Classification

Award Level Focus

Award Level Focus measures the focus and mix of award levels at an institution; generally, this is where an institution awards the most degrees. In determining the number of awards, the classification counts first major only. The logic behind this formula follows a decision tree approach, as follows:

- Graduate-focused institutions:
 - At least 90% of an institution's degrees are doctorates or master's degrees OR
 - More than 50% of an institution's degrees are doctorates or master's degrees if the institution awards fewer than 50 undergraduate degrees
- Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate institutions:
 - An institution awards at least 20 doctorates AND at least 25% of the total degrees awarded are graduate degrees OR
 - An institution awards 100 or more doctorate degrees
- Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's institutions:
 - An institution awards at least 50 master's degrees and doctorate degrees AND at least 25% of the total degrees awarded are graduate degrees OR
 - An institution awards 200 or more master's degrees and doctorate degrees
- Associate/Baccalaureate colleges:
 - An institution awards between 50-90% of its degrees as associates AND awards between 1-50% of its degrees at the baccalaureate level or higher
- Baccalaureate colleges:
 - Of the remaining institutions, 50% or more of its degrees are awarded at the baccalaureate level
- Associate colleges:
 - Of the remaining colleges, 50% or more of its degrees are awarded are associates

Academic Program Mix

Academic Program Mix measures the fields of study in which institutions award 50% or more of their degrees. For most institutions, the classifications use data from undergraduate degrees (associate and bachelor's degrees) only. For graduate-focused institutions, the classifications use data on the graduate degrees only. In determining the academic mix, first and second majors are used. There are three general categories into which institutions are placed.

- **Special Focus:** Generally, the majority of degrees are awarded in a single academic area or field of study. (11 categories; see Special Focus below)
- **Professions-focused:** The majority of degrees are awarded in fields that are classified as pre-professional or career-aligned. (See 2025 CIP Code Map.)
- **Mixed:** Fewer than 50% of degrees are awarded in any one focus area.

Size

Size reflects the size of an institution, as measured by its total 12-month headcount, including full- and part-time students, and including undergraduate and graduate students. There are five categories.

- **Very Small:** Fewer than 500 students total
- **Small:** Between 500 and 4,000 students total
- **Medium:** Between 4,000 and 20,000 students total
- **Large:** Between 20,000 students and 40,000 students total
- **Very Large:** At least 40,000 students total

For the purposes of constructing the Institutional Classifications, Very Small and Small size classifications were combined into Small, and Large and Very Large were combined into Large.

Special Focus Institutions

Generally, institutions receive this academic program mix if they award at least 50% of degrees in a single academic area, field of study, or set of related fields based on their CIP6 data. Institutions may award degrees in other subject areas, and special focus should not be interpreted as the institution's only academic program. For more on specific clusters and which CIP6 programs are included in each category, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map.

Special Focus institutions are also determined following a decision tree approach, as follows:

- **Special Focus: Medical Schools and Centers**
 - This includes institutions who awarded at least 50% of their degrees in CIP 51, Health Professions and Related Programs, and which have a medical school or center as identified in the IPEDS Institutional Characteristics file.
- **Special Focus: Nursing**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs specifically for training and preparing students for nursing. For more information, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map.

- **Special Focus: Applied and Career Studies**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs that are based on and train students for application to practical solutions and technologies, particularly for skilled and trade work. It does not include theoretical sciences nor broader training programs (e.g., education, management) nor does it include administrative fields. For more information, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map. This category is limited to only institutions whose award level focus is associate or associate/baccalaureate.
- **Special Focus: Arts, Music, and Design**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in art, music, design, dance, graphics and animation, and other artistic forms of expression and communication. For more information, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map.
- **Special Focus: Business**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in CIP 52, Business, Management, Marketing and Related Support Services, excluding administrative programs.
- **Special Focus: Theological Studies**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in either CIP 38, Philosophy and Religious Studies, or CIP 39, Theology and Religious Vocations, excluding select programs.
- **Special Focus: Other Health Professions**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in CIP 51, Health Professions and Related Programs. Institutions that were identified as having a medical school or center or which had a concentration in nursing are not included in this category.
- **Special Focus: Law**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in CIP 22, Legal Professions and Studies. These institutions are limited only to institutions whose Award Level Focus is graduate-focused.
- **Special Focus: Arts and Sciences**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs in the humanities, arts, and social sciences as well as generalized sciences. For more information, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map. These institutions are limited to only institutions whose Award Level Focus is baccalaureate.

- **Special Focus: Technology, Engineering, and Sciences**
 - This includes institutions that award at least 50% of their degrees in academic programs focused on specialized sciences and mathematics, technology, and engineering. For more information, please see the 2025 CIP Code Map. These institutions are limited only to institutions whose award level focus is in the baccalaureate or higher categories.
- **Special Focus: Graduate Studies**
 - These institutions have an Award Level Focus of graduate-focused and do not fall into the special focus categories noted above.

Classifications

Institutions are organized into 31 groups based on these dimensions. In cases where groups included fewer than 30 institutions, dimensions were combined in order to create more meaningful and useful classifications. The 2025 Institutional Classifications include the following:

- Associate Colleges
 - Mixed Associate Large
 - Mixed Associate Medium
 - Mixed Associate Small
 - Professions-focused Associate Large/Medium
 - Professions-focused Associate Small
- Associate/Baccalaureate
 - Mixed Associate/Baccalaureate
 - Professions-focused Associate/Baccalaureate
- Baccalaureate
 - Mixed Baccalaureate
 - Professions-focused Baccalaureate Medium
 - Professions-focused Baccalaureate Small
- Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's
 - Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's Large/Medium
 - Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's Small
 - Professions-focused Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's Large/Medium
 - Professions-focused Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's Small
- Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate
 - Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Large
 - Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Medium
 - Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Small
 - Professions-focused Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Large
 - Professions-focused Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Medium
 - Professions-focused Undergraduate/Graduate-Doctorate Small
- Special Focus Institutions
 - Special Focus: Applied and Career Studies
 - Special Focus: Arts and Sciences
 - Special Focus: Arts, Music, and Design

- Special Focus: Business
- Special Focus: Graduate Studies
- Special Focus: Law
- Special Focus: Medical Schools and Centers
- Special Focus: Nursing
- Special Focus: Other Health Professions
- Special Focus: Technology, Engineering, and Sciences
- Special Focus: Theological Studies

Changes from the 2021 Basic Classification

There are several changes to the classification methodology in 2025. A few key changes include:

- The six previous classifications (Basic, Enrollment Profile, Undergraduate Profile, Undergraduate Institutional Program, Graduate Instructional Program, Size and Setting) have been discontinued. The 2025 Institutional Classification replaces the Basic Classification and incorporates some elements of the other classification types.
- Previously, institutions were classified on a single year of data. The 2025 classification generally classifies institutions based on a three-year average of their data. Institutions that merged or changed configuration during that time period are only classified based on one or two years of data, as appropriate.
- The 2021 Basic Classification started by placing Tribal Colleges and Universities into their own group, then institutions that were designated as special focus were set into their own portion of the classification, and then all other institutions were organized by the highest degree awarded. In the 2025 Institutional Classification, Tribal Colleges and Universities are included among other institutions given that they have a number of different organizational structures, although the classifications note their designation as Tribal institutions.
- In general, the 2025 Institutional Classification looks at three dimensions: Award Level Focus, which looks more holistically at the types of degrees an institution awards; Academic Program Mix, which looks at the fields of study in which an institution awards undergraduate or graduate (for graduate-focused institutions) degrees; and the Size of an institution. While not all groups are defined by all three dimensions, most are.
- Research activity is measured separately.
- Award Level Focus measures where most or all of an institution's degrees are awarded and does not maintain a strict focus on highest degree awarded. As a result, some institutions are no longer classified based on the highest degree awarded because that is a small percentage or small absolute value relative to their overall degree profile as well as relative to others in that category. Additionally, dimensions with the same names as ones that existed in the Basic Classification received adjustments in methodology. For example, the associate college category used to require 100% of degrees to be associates; the updated measure is different.
- The Academic Program Mix and Special Focus categories include new types of program mixes and, similar to Award Level Focus, measure the fields of study in which most of all of an institution's graduates received their degrees. While the CIP Code map builds off of the previous version, there have been some updates.

- Among Special Focus institutions, the 2025 update adopts a less strict approach than the previous methodology in that it no longer requires institutions to limit the degrees they award in other CIP2 categories in order to be classified as a Special Focus institution. The “other” category has been removed, and new categories of Applied and Career Studies and Nursing have been added. Technology, Engineering, and Sciences has had a number of changes from the previous classification to better capture institutions with this academic focus. Other categories that include a concentrated group (Arts and Sciences, Graduate Studies) are now found under Special Focus.
- The Size dimension in Size and Setting previously used an FTE measure based on fall enrollment. The 2025 measure includes full headcount over 12 months, with full- and part-time students counting equally.
- Finally, previously the Carnegie Classifications had collected data from some institutions that did not report to IPEDS. The Carnegie Classifications do not collect nor verify institutions’ data, and those institutions are no longer included.

Highest Degree Awarded

Given the historic use of the highest degree awarded component of the Carnegie Classifications, and given the Carnegie Classifications’ use for longitudinal analysis and study, the 2025 Classifications file includes a calculation of this field as an additional dimension, although institutions are not classified based on it. As noted above, as Award Level Focus focuses on where the majority of an institution’s degrees are awarded and where it is has shown it is focused in terms of degree production, some institutions may award a higher degree than the one on which they are classified.

Over the past several years, we have heard from the field that the previous Carnegie Classification methodology to calculate highest degree was useful. The 2025 highest degree awarded dimension maintains much of the 2021 methodology, with a few updates. Following that approach, to be in the doctorate or master’s categories, institutions must award a sufficient number of that degree.

Categories:

- **Doctorate**
 - Institutions are included in this category if they:
 - Award at least 20 doctorates (any type) OR
 - Award no other degrees than the doctorate OR
 - Award at least 50% of their degrees as graduate degrees and the majority of those are doctorates
- **Master’s degree**
 - Institutions are included in this category if they:
 - Award at least 50 master’s degrees OR
 - Award no other degrees but master’s degrees OR
 - Award at least 50% of their degrees as graduate degrees and the majority of those are master’s degrees

- **Bachelor's degree**
 - If the institution did not meet the criteria above, award 1 or more bachelor's degrees
- **Associate degrees**
 - If the institution did not meet the criteria above, award 1 or more associate degrees

Campus Setting

The previous Size and Setting Classification included a measure of setting for baccalaureate and above institutions that focused on whether and to what amount they were residential. The 2025 Campus Setting dimension maintains some of those previous categories and methodologies and expands on them in two key ways. First, primarily associate colleges are also included. Second, given the growth of distance education since the setting dimension was written in 2005, institutions that have a sufficient number of students who are learning exclusively through distance education courses are now captured in online learning categories.

Data used and limitations:

- IPEDS 12-month unduplicated headcount by distance education status and level of student, 2022-23
- Institutional Characteristics Data File, 2022-23

We acknowledge that data on housing capacity is not necessarily an indication of how many students live on campus. Additionally, data on distance education may be inconsistently reported, and it may not capture students who are learning in hybrid or other types of online learning environments for some of their instruction. Given that, the classifications use data only on students that have been reported to be learning exclusively online, and we hope to gather feedback on this dimension for future updates to learn how it can be most useful.

Categories:

- **Graduate-focused**
 - This is based on the Institutional Classification dimension; few or no undergraduates were enrolled
- **Primarily online**
 - More than 80% of undergraduate students are enrolled only in courses that are considered distance education courses
- **Online and on-campus learning**
 - Between 50-80% of undergraduate students are enrolled only in courses that are considered distance education courses.
- **Highly residential**
 - At least 80% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time, and the institution offers enough housing to hold at least 50% of undergraduates.

- **Primarily residential**
 - At least 80% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time, and the institution offers enough housing to hold at least 25% of undergraduates.
- **Residential**
 - At least 50% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time, and the institution offers enough housing to hold at least 10% of undergraduates.
- **Primarily non-residential**
 - The institution offers housing, but less than 50% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time or the institution offers housing for less than 25% of undergraduates.
- **Not residential, mostly full-time**
 - At least 50% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time, and the institution does not offer any institutionally controlled housing.
- **Not residential, mostly part-time**
 - Less than 50% of undergraduate students are enrolled full-time, and the institution does not offer any institutionally controlled housing.