

Harper College's impressive rates of student completion are the result of an intentional, equity-focused student success strategy known as You Matter, We Care SOAR. This framework anchored the college's [2021–2024 Strategic Plan](#) and drove institutional effectiveness through six core strategic goals: eliminating barriers to achievement, fostering inclusive teaching and learning practices, and expanding workforce partnerships, among others. The SOAR initiative placed Harper's mission at the forefront and laid the groundwork for substantial improvements in student outcomes. The Belonging, Thriving, Advancing 2025–2029 Strategic Plan expands on SOAR's success in student completion by prioritizing not only inclusive support and innovative education, but also post-Harper achievement—ensuring graduates thrive both during and after their time at the College.

Building upon the foundation established by SOAR, Harper College identified five critical milestones for first-year students, collectively called the Path for Success, that have proven to substantially increase completion rates and reduce equity gaps across student populations. These milestones include: (1) selecting an academic program, (2) developing an academic plan in partnership with an advisor, (3) completing a Start Smart course, (4) finishing gateway-level English and math courses, and (5) earning 24 credits for full-time students or 12 credits for part-time students during the first year. Students who accomplish all five of these benchmarks achieve a remarkable 75% graduation rate, and, notably, equity gaps are eliminated for Latine, Black, Pell-eligible, and first-generation learners. The Path for Success is introduced to all credential-seeking students during New Student Orientation and many milestones are integrated into prominent programs such as Fast Track, Promise, Power of 15, UIUC Engineering Pathways, and the now-sunset OMD, ARC, and GLIDE initiatives. In Academic Year 2025, these programs collectively served 1,989 students and achieved a combined three-year graduation rate of 62%.

Recognizing the effectiveness of these specialized programs, which previously reached only about 300 students each year, Harper is now scaling their most successful elements through SOAR+, a comprehensive First Year Experience program launching in Spring 2026. SOAR+ is designed to serve approximately 1,100 first-time, credential-seeking students annually by consolidating best practices from the various niche initiatives and providing intentional, college-wide support for students to meet the Path for Success milestones. This expanded approach aims to further close equity gaps and boost overall completion rates across a much larger cohort of students.

Start Smart courses continue to be a central component of Harper's strategy. To increase participation, the college established a dedicated faculty role—the FYS Coordinator—and, responding to student input and course outcomes, has redesigned all First Year Seminar (FYS) courses to be eight weeks or shorter. The Areas of Interest Committee ensures that

every academic program map includes either an FYS or an embedded Start Smart course. Harper also maintains strong levels of college readiness in math and English, as seen in the Fall 2024 cohort, where 69% of first-time, full- and part-time students demonstrated math readiness and 76% demonstrated English readiness. SOAR+ will ensure these foundational courses are completed within students' first year.

Academic advisors play a vital role in supporting these strategies: 97% of Fall 2024 first-time students selected a program of study, and 72% developed an academic plan. Program maps incorporate the key milestones, and partnerships with four-year institutions—through the University Center and articulation agreements, including those aligned with the Illinois Articulation Initiative—have contributed to an average three-year transfer rate of 81% and a six-year bachelor's attainment rate of 89.7% for 2019 transfer graduates. Career program completions are also on the rise, with associate degrees (AAS) up 11.7% and certificates up 34.8%, many stackable to facilitate career progression.

Harper enhances student credential completion by partnering with employers and offering apprenticeships, internships, and mentorships. These hands-on experiences, coordinated through the Job Placement Resource Center, Hire a Hawk, academic departments, and the Education Foundation, provide students with practical skills and real-world exposure that complement their academic programs. This approach ensures that students not only earn credentials but are well prepared for immediate entry into the workforce, supporting success and advancing economic mobility.

Harper College's strong student completion rates are driven by a comprehensive, equity-focused approach, most notably the You Matter, We Care SOAR framework. SOAR anchored the college's 2021–2024 strategic plan through six core goals, including eliminating barriers to achievement, fostering inclusive teaching and learning, and expanding workforce partnerships. This initiative placed Harper's mission at the center of its efforts and set the stage for measurable gains in student outcomes. The current Belonging, Thriving, Advancing 2025–2029 Strategic Plan builds on SOAR's foundation, expanding the focus to not only student completion but also post-graduation success.

A key strategy is the Path for Success—a set of five critical milestones for first-year students: (1) selecting an academic program, (2) developing an academic plan with an

advisor, (3) completing a Start Smart course, (4) finishing gateway-level English and math, and (5) earning 24 credits (full-time) or 12 credits (part-time) in the first year. Students who meet all five reach a 75% graduation rate, with equity gaps eliminated for Latine, Black, Pell-eligible, and first-generation students. These milestones are introduced to all credential-seeking students at New Student Orientation and are embedded in prominent programs such as Fast Track, Promise, Power of 15, UIUC Engineering Pathways, and the now-sunset OMD, ARC, and GLIDE initiatives. In Academic Year 2025, these programs collectively served 1,989 students, achieving a 62% combined three-year graduation rate.

Recognizing the impact of the sunset programs, which previously served about 300 students annually, Harper is scaling up through SOAR+, a comprehensive First Year Experience program launching Spring 2026. SOAR+ will reach approximately 1,100 first-time, credential-seeking students per year, consolidating best practices from niche initiatives and providing college-wide support for all students to achieve the Path for Success milestones. This scaling is designed to further close equity gaps and raise overall completion rates.

Start Smart courses remain central to Harper's strategy. To increase participation, the college created the FYS Coordinator faculty role and, based on student feedback and course data, redesigned all First Year Seminar (FYS) courses to be eight weeks or shorter. The Areas of Interest Committee is currently working to ensure that every program map includes either an FYS or an embedded Start Smart course. In Fall 2024, 69% of first-time students demonstrated math readiness and 76% demonstrated English readiness; SOAR+ will require completion of these foundational courses in the first year.

Academic advisors are vital: 97% of Fall 2024 first-time students selected a program of study, and 72% built an academic plan. Program maps embed key milestones, and transfer partnerships—through the University Center and articulation agreements and Illinois Articulation Initiative alignment—have contributed to an 81% three-year transfer rate and an 89.7% six-year bachelor's attainment rate for 2019 transfer graduates. Career program completions are increasing, with associate degrees up 11.7% and certificates up 34.8%, many of which are stackable to support further advancement.

Harper also partners with employers to offer apprenticeships, internships, and mentorships, coordinated through the Job Placement Resource Center, Hire a Hawk, academic departments, and the Education Foundation. These hands-on experiences complement classroom learning and prepare students for immediate workforce entry, supporting both completion and economic mobility.

In summary, Harper's most important completion strategies—SOAR/SOAR+, Path for Success milestones, Start Smart/FYS courses, proactive advising, strong transfer pathways, and robust career partnerships—are now scaled college-wide, impacting all credential-seeking students, with particular emphasis on closing equity gaps and supporting underrepresented and first-generation learners.

One gap that has been identified is that according to National Student Clearinghouse data, 37% of our students who take Dual Credit coursework are not transferring on to any college or university post high school graduation. Harper has tasked a new strategic enrollment committee focused on dual credit to address this issue. Initiatives formed to address this concern include hosting Dual Credit students on Harper's campus, creating one-sheet marketing materials, and pursuing a targeted marketing approach.

Harper hosted its first Hawk for a Day initiative designed to show Dual Credit students the potential educational paths they can complete post high school. By bringing students to campus, faculty were able to showcase their curriculum through interactive mock classes. Initial survey results showed that many students in attendance had altered their post-secondary pathway, and now considered attending Harper.

The dual credit advisor is creating easy to follow documents for high school counselors to work with students on. These documents highlight the dual credit opportunities available at their respective school, and the amount of coursework needed to complete certain degrees or certificates. The goal is that once a student sees that they are close to completion, their matriculation to Harper or a future transfer institution will increase.

Analysis of the 2019 student cohort reveals notable gaps in both three-year transfer rates and six-year baccalaureate attainment among student groups. While 67.8% of all students who earned a transfer degree (AA, AS, AES, AFA) transferred within three years and 92.7% ultimately earned a baccalaureate degree, disparities are evident for certain populations. Specifically, Black students ($n < 5$) had a three-year transfer rate of 33.3%, and Hispanic, first-generation, and Pell-eligible students posted rates of 58.2%, 62.3%, and 61.8%, respectively—all below the overall cohort rate. In terms of six-year baccalaureate attainment, Black and Hispanic students showed gaps at 66.7% and 86.5%, respectively, compared to the cohort average, though these rates remain above the national average.

PERFORMANCE DATA

The table below shows each of the three core indicators of performance, as well as the state-determined levels of performance (SDLPs) for fiscal years 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. [SDLP: *State Determined Level of Performance*; ALP: *Actual Level of Performance*; +/-: *Difference of the two*].

Performance Indicator	Fiscal Year 2021 Data (Fiscal Year 2023 Application)			Fiscal Year 2022 Data (Fiscal Year 2024 Application)			Fiscal Year 2023 Data (Fiscal Year 2025 Application)		
	SDLP	ALP	+/−	SDLP	ALP	+/−	SDLP	ALP	+/−
1P1: Postsecondary Retention and Placement	69.00%	82.37%	+13.37%	69.40%	78.40%	+9%	69.80%	83.62	+13.82%
2P1: Earned Recognized Postsecondary Credential	70.10%	87.25%	17.15%	70.50%	75.71%	+5.21%	70.90%	89.85%	+18.95%
3P1: Nontraditional Program Enrollment	09.60%	12.82		09.80%	11.76%	+1.96%	09.90%	14.61%	+4.71%