# Evaluating the Impact of Online Learning
## INDIANA UNIVERSITY MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

## BACKGROUND

THE Playbook for Enhancing Indiana's Mental and Behavioral Health Workforce (Playbook) was developed from 2023 to 2024 by the Indiana University Bowen Center for Health Workforce Research and Policy (Bowen Center). This initiative, sponsored by Lilly Endowment Inc., involved significant input from stakeholders across the state, including representatives of state government, higher education, employers, professional associations, and individual practitioners. The Playbook features recommendations and considerations, derived from stakeholder input and validated by research, aimed at strengthening the workforce dedicated to providing mental and behavioral health services and shoring up the post-secondary education pipeline to practice.

### THE EDUCATION PIPELINE TO PRACTICE AND ONLINE LEARNING

Indiana degree programs preparing students for careers in mental and behavioral health are the foundation of the state's post-secondary education pipeline to practice. The Playbook project dug deep into the data to understand the post-secondary degree program landscape in Indiana. Initial investigations, conducted in collaboration with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, revealed significant enrollment increases in online learning programs over the past five years. The impact of online programs on workforce development in Indiana and student outcomes were raised by stakeholders during Playbook related engagements sessions. There was particular interest in the proportion of students in these online programs that were Indiana residents, as it was suggested that these students may be more likely to stay and work in Indiana after graduation[1]. Additional research was needed to adequately explore this topic. The Playbook ultimately included a recommendation calling for a dedicated assessment of the impact of online programs on student outcomes and in-state retention in Indiana.

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH TRAINING PROGRAMS
### THAT OFFER ONLINE LEARNING
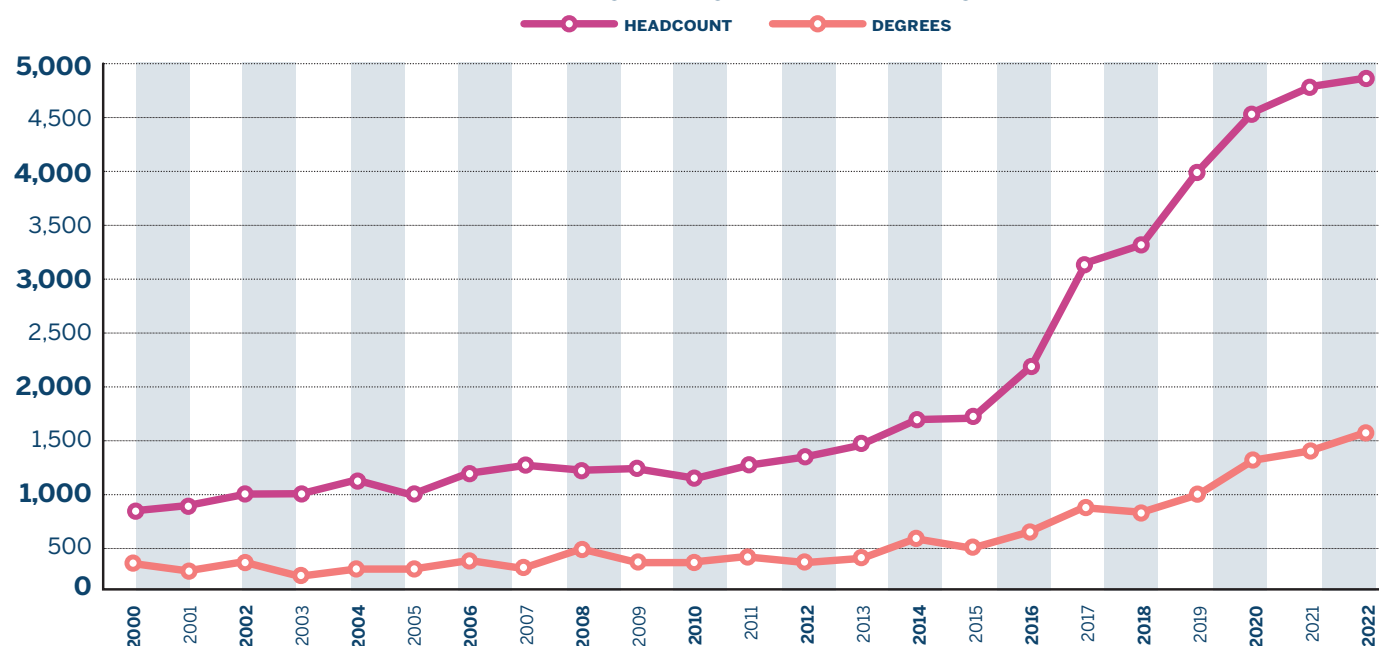


**Source:** Commission for Higher Education enrollment and graduation data for Playbook Programs, 2023.

BOWEN CENTER
FOR HEALTH WORKFORCE RESEARCH AND POLICY

INDIANA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

## RUNNING THE BALL ON PLAYBOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Indiana University (IU), home of the Bowen Center, has led the way towards implementing Playbook recommendations, including an assessment of online programs. IU's online programs are offered by the seven campuses of the university, strategically led and supported by IU Online, an office that facilitates intercampus collaboration, leverages multi-campus resources, manages the IU Online brand, and provides university-wide support for online academic program development, marketing and recruitment, student services, and compliance. IU Online and the Bowen Center have partnered on an exploration of impacts and outcomes for IU's mental and behavioral health online programs.

## IU DEGREE PROGRAMS AND ONLINE LEARNING

Indiana University has 16 distinct degree programs preparing students for mental and behavioral health careers. Of these, two – an Education Specialist (EdS) in School Psychology and Masters in Social Work (MSW) - are available in an online format. The School Psychology EdS is offered online as a collaborative program between three IU campuses.

# IU BHHS DEGREE PROGRAMS

| PROGRAM | MODALITY | CAMPUSES WITH ENROLLMENT FALL 2019-FALL 2024 |
|---|---|---|
| Addiction Neuroscience PHD | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Clinical Mental Health Counseling MA | On Campus | Southeast (SE) |
| Clinical Psychology PHD | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Counseling Psychology PHD | On Campus | Bloomington |
| Industrial/Organizational Psychology MS | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Learning & Development Science MSED | On Campus | Bloomington |
| Learning & Development Science PHD | On Campus | Bloomington |
| Mental Health Counseling & Counselor Education MSED | On Campus | Bloomington |
| Mental Health Counseling MA | On Campus | East, Kokomo, SE, Columbus |
| Psychiatric Mental Health NP MSN | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Psychiatric Mental Health NP Post-Masters Certificate (PMC) | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Psychology PhD | On Campus | Bloomington |
| School Psychology EdS | ONLINE COLLABORATIVE | East, Kokomo, South Bend (SB) |
| School Psychology EdS | On Campus | Bloomington |
| School Psychology PHD | On Campus | Bloomington |
| Social Work JD/MSW Dual Degree | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Social Work MSW | ONLINE | Indianapolis |
| Social Work MSW | On Campus | Bloomington, Indianapolis, East, Northwest, SB |
| Social Work MSW/JD Dual Degree | On Campus | Indianapolis |
| Social Work PHD | On Campus | Indianapolis |

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on mental and behavioral health programs by modality and campus.

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1 Bakoyema, B., & Fencher, T. (2024). *Opportunities and Obstacles for In-state Retention of University Graduates. Journal of Education Practices and Trends.* Available at https://www.sreb.org/post/opportunities-and-obstacles-state-retention-university-graduates

## DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF THE WORKFORCE FOR INDIANA: ENROLLMENT INSIGHTS

Developing the next generation of mental and behavioral health professionals is a strategic priority in Indiana as there are significant workforce shortages[2]. Enrollment trends provide key insights for higher education, workforce development leaders and policymakers into how well this goal is being accomplished. This brief describes enrollment across Indiana University's mental and behavioral health programs, drilling down into enrollment of students from Indiana and from rural[3] areas.

## THE SURGE IN STUDENT INTEREST IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Fall enrollment trends in IU mental and behavioral health (MBH) programs show substantial increases in online programs. Between fall 2019 and fall 2024, online MBH program enrollment increased from 318 students to 510, an increase of 60.4%. Meanwhile, on-campus MBH enrollment declined 18.6%, from 1,223 in 2019 to 996 in 2024.

### ENROLLMENT TRENDS
IN MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

ON-CAMPUS    ONLINE
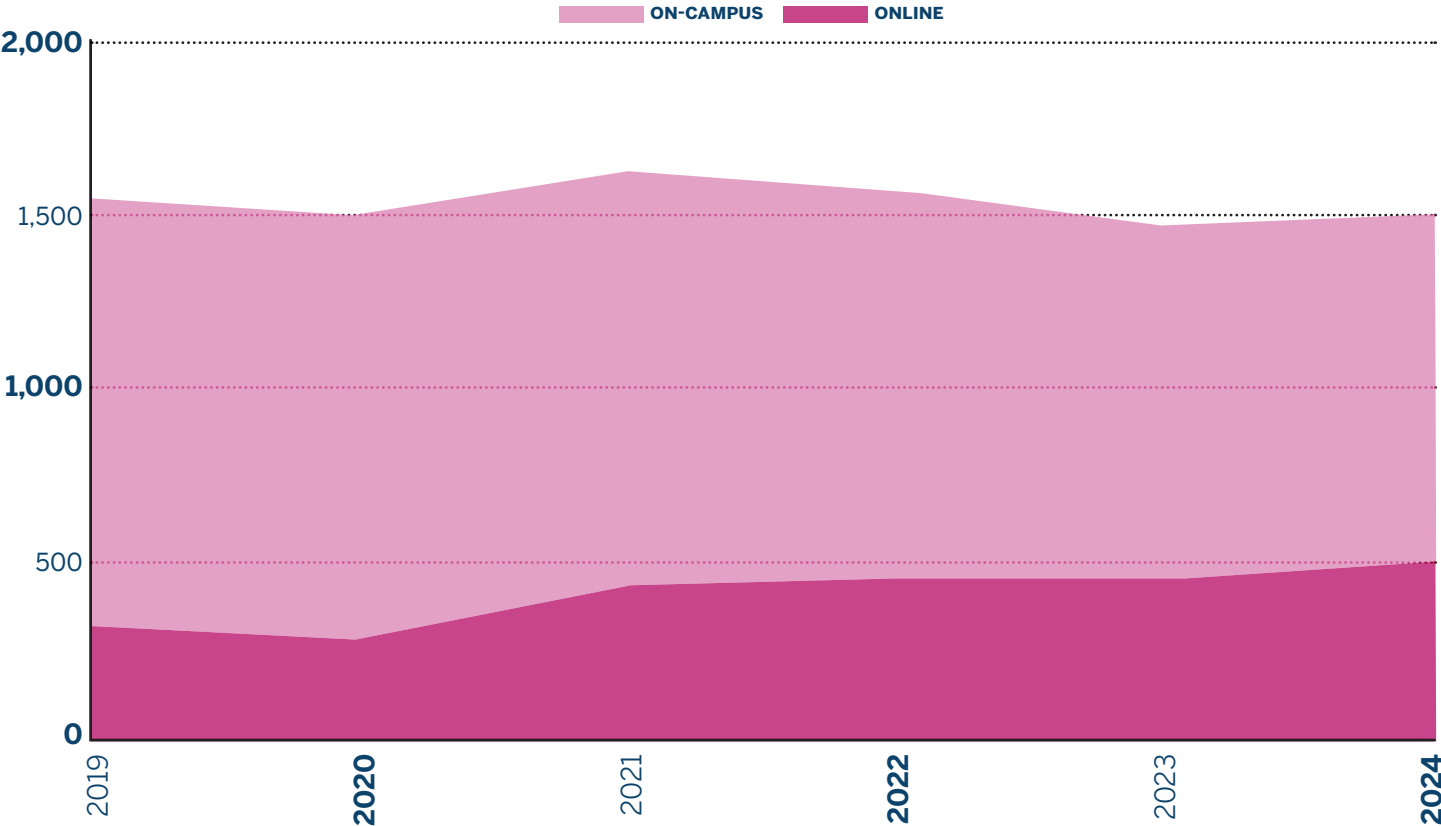


**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on fall enrollment trends for mental and behavioral health programs by modality.

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[2] *Health Resources and Services Administration Health Profession Shortage Area Designation. Available at* https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/hpsa-find

[3] *For the purposes of this brief, rurality is defined using 2023 US Department of Agriculture* Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. *Any counties identified as a nonmetropolitan RUCC are referred to as rural in this brief.*

## ONLINE PROGRAMS ATTRACT LOCAL TALENT

Understanding the residency status of students enrolling in online programs demonstrates how IU's online programs leverage talent within our state.

- The percentage of Indiana resident students in online MBH programs increased from 80% in fall 2019 to 90% in fall 2024.

- In contrast, the percentage of Indiana resident students in on-campus MBH programs declined slightly from 79% in fall 2019 to 76% in fall 2024.

The growing proportion of Indiana resident online students suggests that IU's online programs contribute significantly to IU 2030 goals and Indiana's workforce retention. Students who study in-state are more likely to remain in the state for employment. [4]

> **The Indiana University Strategic Plan, "IU 2030," includes a commitment to engagement, partnership, and collaboration to strengthen the vitality of Indiana and beyond.**

## % INDIANA RESIDENTS
### IN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS
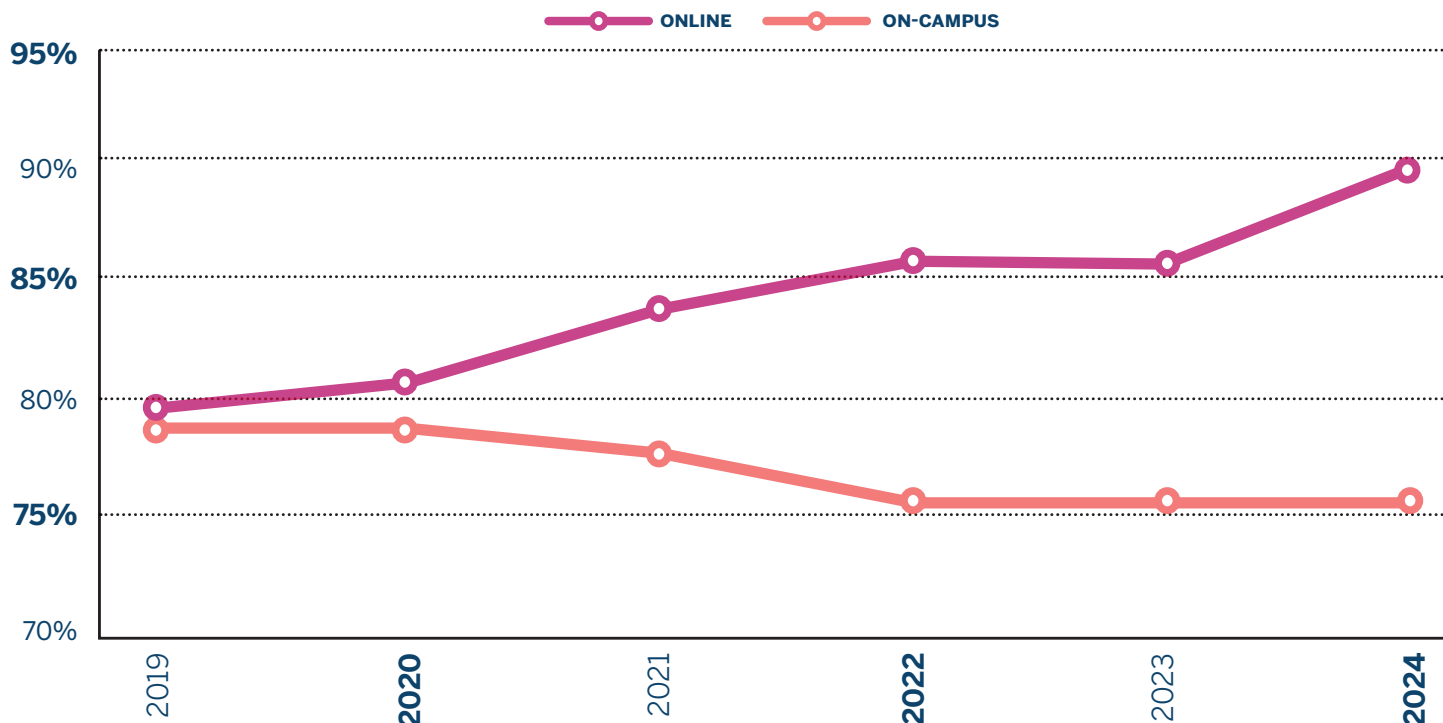


**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on percentage of Indiana residents (fall terms) enrolled in mental and behavioral health programs by modality.
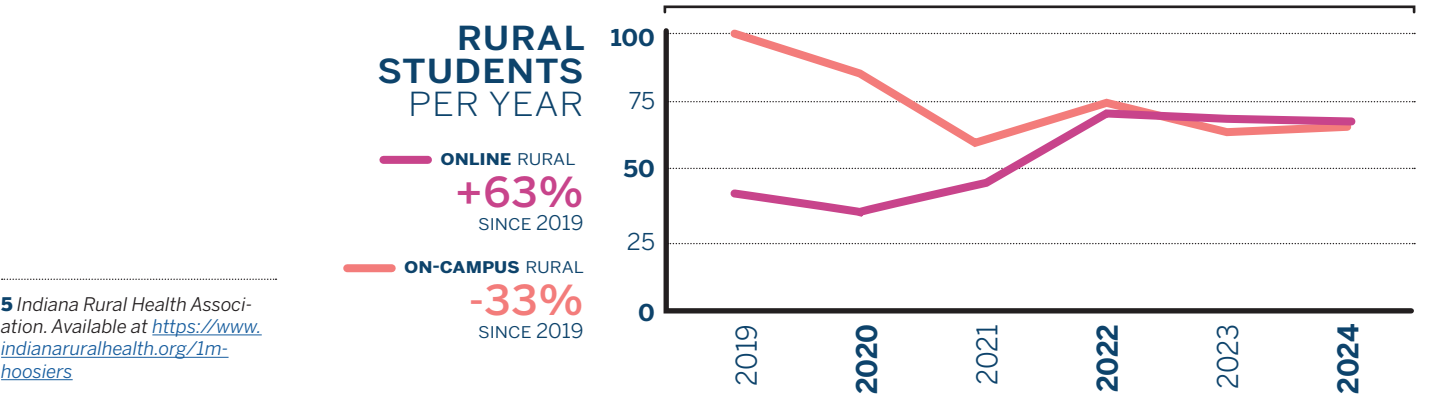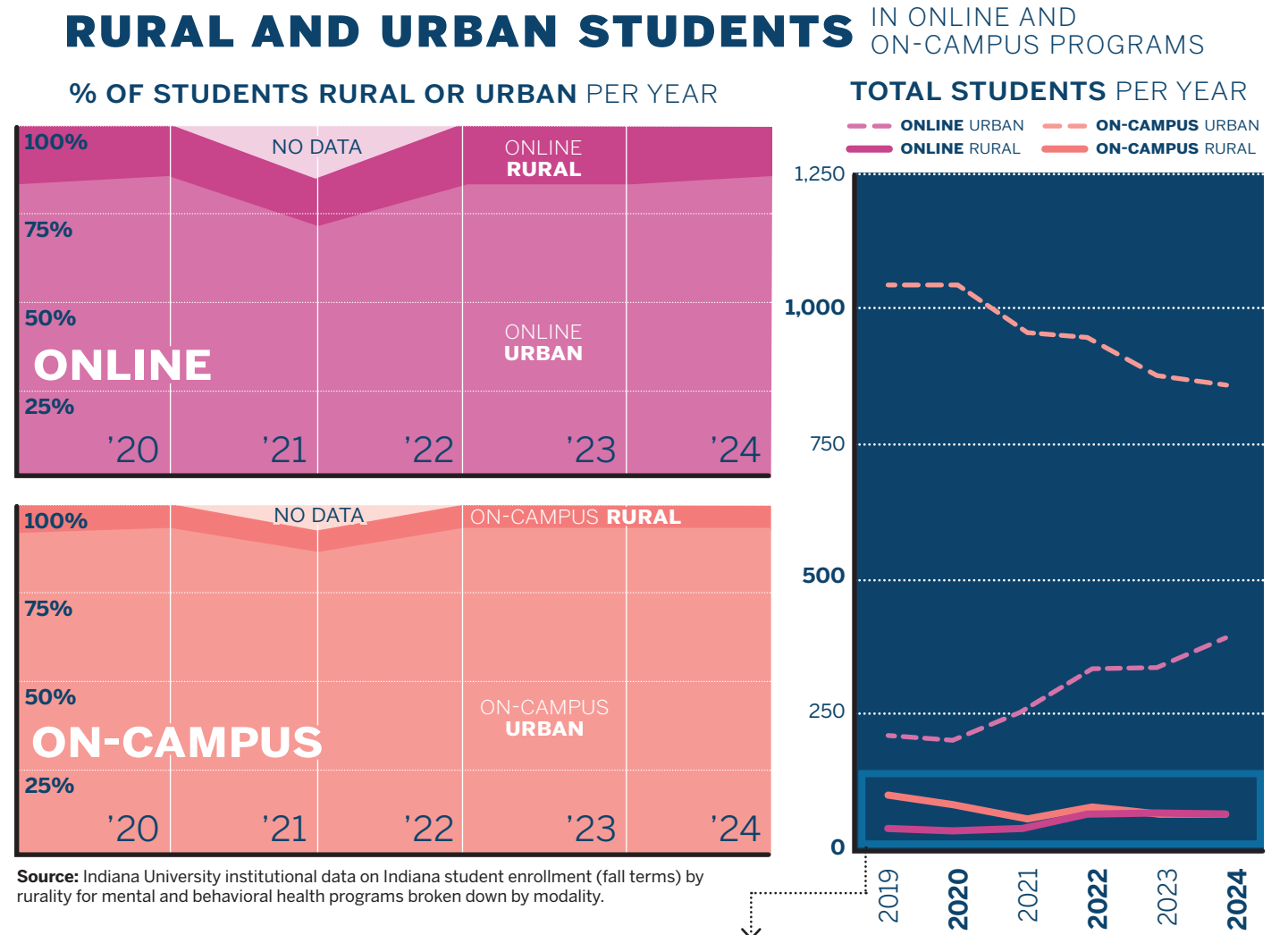
**4** Bakoyema, B., & Fencher, T. (2024). *Opportunities and Obstacles for In-state Retention of University Graduates. Journal of Education Practices and Trends.* Available at https://www.sreb.org/post/opportunities-and-obstacles-state-retention-university-graduates

## RURAL HOOSIER STUDENTS EMBRACING ONLINE EDUCATION

With an estimated one million Hoosiers living in rural areas, ensuring access to education in those areas is a priority for both higher education institutions and policymakers.[5] Enrollment in IU's online MBH programs has markedly increased for students from Indiana's rural communities.
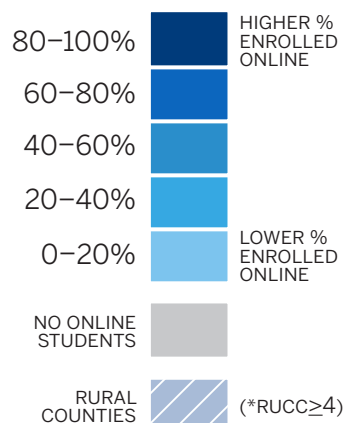
- The number of students in online MBH programs located in rural areas of Indiana increased from 41 to 67 (63%) from fall 2019 to fall 2024.

- During this same timeframe, on-campus MBH program enrollment of students located in rural areas of Indiana has declined significantly, from 99 to 66 (33%).
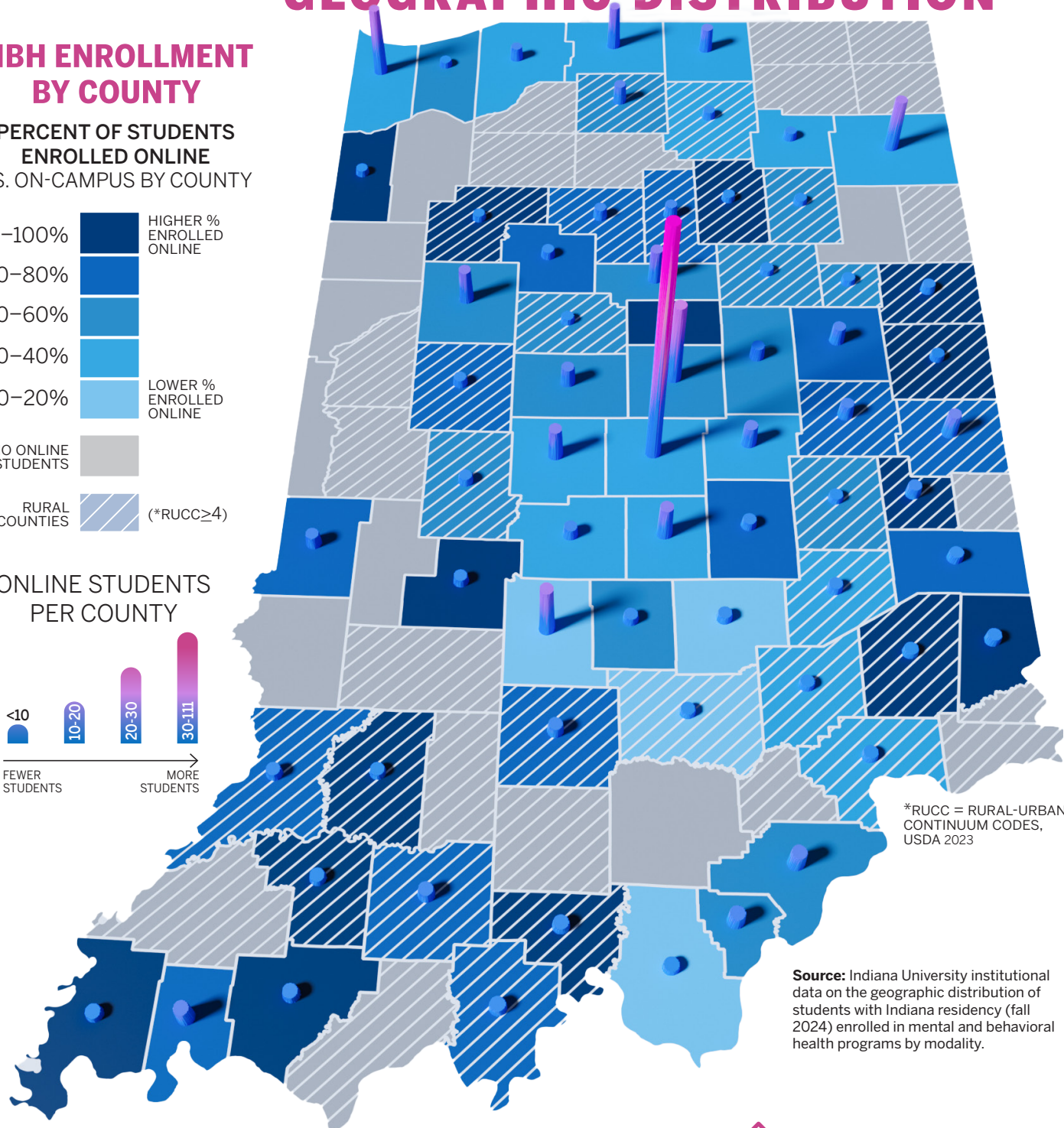
# RURAL AND URBAN STUDENTS IN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

## % OF STUDENTS RURAL OR URBAN PER YEAR

## TOTAL STUDENTS PER YEAR



**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on Indiana student enrollment (fall terms) by rurality for mental and behavioral health programs broken down by modality.

**RURAL STUDENTS PER YEAR**

**ONLINE RURAL**
**+63%** SINCE 2019

**ON-CAMPUS RURAL**
**-33%** SINCE 2019

5 Indiana Rural Health Association. Available at https://www.indianaruralhealth.org/1m-hoosiers

# GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

## MBH ENROLLMENT BY COUNTY

### PERCENT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED ONLINE
VS. ON-CAMPUS BY COUNTY

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 80–100% | | HIGHER % ENROLLED ONLINE |
| 60–80% | | |
| 40–60% | | |
| 20–40% | | |
| 0–20% | | LOWER % ENROLLED ONLINE |
| NO ONLINE STUDENTS | | |
| RURAL COUNTIES | | (*RUCC≥4) |

### ONLINE STUDENTS PER COUNTY

<10    10-20    20-30    30-111

FEWER STUDENTS → MORE STUDENTS
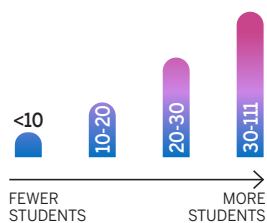
*RUCC = RURAL-URBAN CONTINUUM CODES, USDA 2023

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on the geographic distribution of students with Indiana residency (fall 2024) enrolled in mental and behavioral health programs by modality.

In Fall 2024, IU's online mental and behavioral health programs had enrolled students representing 65 of Indiana's 92 counties (70.6%), 30 (46.1%) of which are rural counties.

| 27 WITHOUT ONLINE STUDENTS | 65 COUNTIES WITH ONLINE STUDENTS |
|---|---|

| 35 URBAN COUNTIES | 30 RURAL COUNTIES |
|---|---|

## PART-TIME COURSELOADS: EDUCATION WITH FLEXIBILITY

While traditional students may select a full-time courseload, part-time courseloads make education more accessible to a variety of individuals. Individuals with child or family care responsibilities, those who may need to work to ensure benefits eligibility or those who choose to work to reduce the expense of their education may choose to pursue a part-time courseload. Part-time courseloads enable people to manage multiple responsibilities while also advancing their education and reaching their career goals. Approximately 50% of students in online mental and behavioral health programs chose to pursue their education part-time.

It's important to note that those part-time online learners remain embedded in the communities in which they live and work while completing their studies. In essence, these students may gain experiential learning in their jobs while immediately applying the knowledge and skills from their coursework even before their MBH degree is awarded.

### PART-TIME ENROLLMENT
IN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS
— ONLINE  — ON-CAMPUS
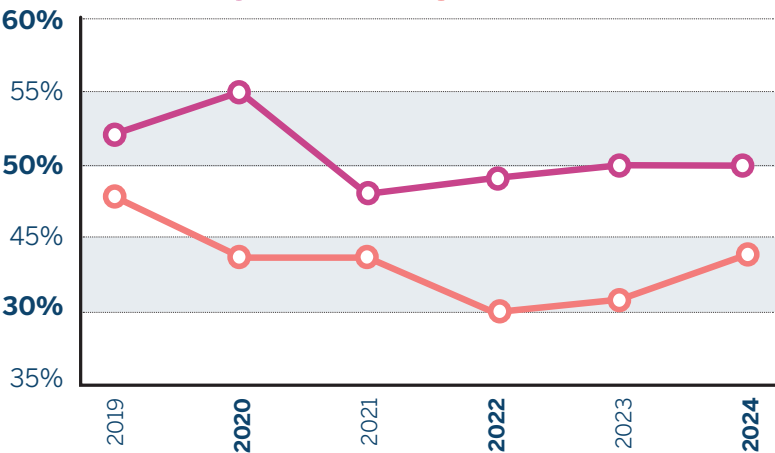


**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on fall student part-time enrollment status for mental and behavioral health programs by modality

# SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

## EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

IU is committed to providing an excellent educational experience for all students. Ensuring student success across the institution is a strategic priority within IU 2030. Measuring student success through indicators such as grade point average (GPA), attrition, and degree completion helps to ensure easily identifiable markers of success.

## ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE:
### STUDENT GPA OVER TIME

Online mental and behavioral health students consistently have strong academic performance. In fact, these students have higher average semester GPAs than those enrolled in on-campus programs. In fall 2019, the average semester GPA for online students was 3.55 which increased to 3.70 in fall 2024. Both groups show improvement over time with on-campus increasing from 3.48 to 3.58 over the same period.

### AVERAGE GPA
IN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS
— ONLINE  — ON-CAMPUS
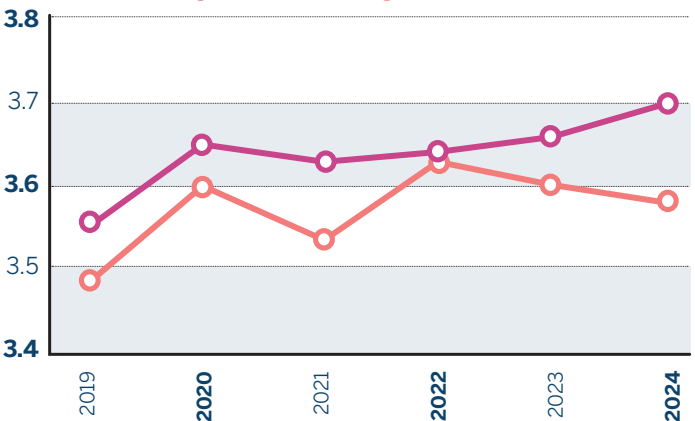


**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on the average GPA (fall terms) for students enrolled in mental and behavioral health programs by modality.
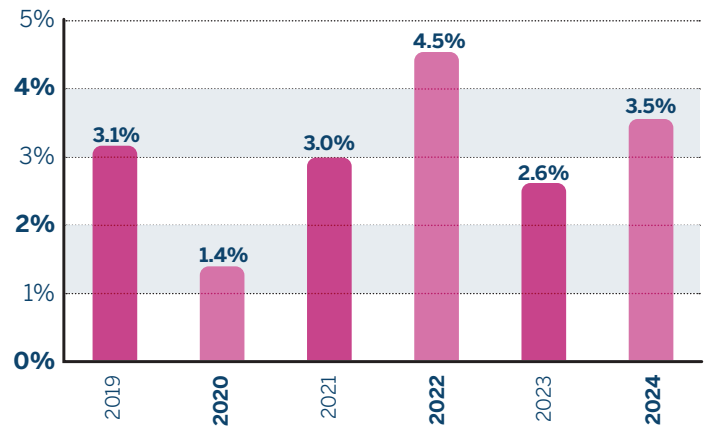
## EXAMINING STUDENT ATTRITION:
### IU VS. NATIONAL

Student attrition, or the number of enrolled students at the beginning of the term who are no longer enrolled at the end of the term, can be due to a variety of factors including competing personal priorities, cost of education, and academic difficulties. In online mental and behavioral health programs, between 3-5% of fall-enrolled students were no longer enrolled by the end of the fall term. To put this finding in context, the Council of Graduate Schools estimates that 10% of master's students in STEM programs leave their program entirely after a semester[6]. This suggests that student attrition in IU online programs may be lower than national estimates on student persistence meaning more students continue their education.

**STUDENT ATTRITION**
% OF ONLINE STUDENTS NOT ENROLLED AT END OF TERM

| Year | Attrition |
|------|-----------|
| 2019 | 3.1% |
| 2020 | 1.4% |
| 2021 | 3.0% |
| 2022 | 4.5% |
| 2023 | 2.6% |
| 2024 | 3.5% |

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on student attrition (fall term) for students enrolled in online mental and behavioral health programs.

## DEGREE ACHIEVEMENT:
### HIGH COMPLETIONS IN ONLINE PROGRAMS

Degree completion rates reveal the percentage of students who have completed their educational requirements and been awarded a degree[7]. Of the 258 students who first enrolled in an online MBH program between fall 2019 and spring 2021, 85% have earned an MBH degree (as of February 2025). This rate is comparable to new on-campus MBH students, whose MBH degree completion rate was 84% in that same timeframe. These rates demonstrate this student body's commitment to advancing their education.

**DEGREE COMPLETION**
% OF STUDENTS AWARDED DEGREE. 2019–21 AVERAGE
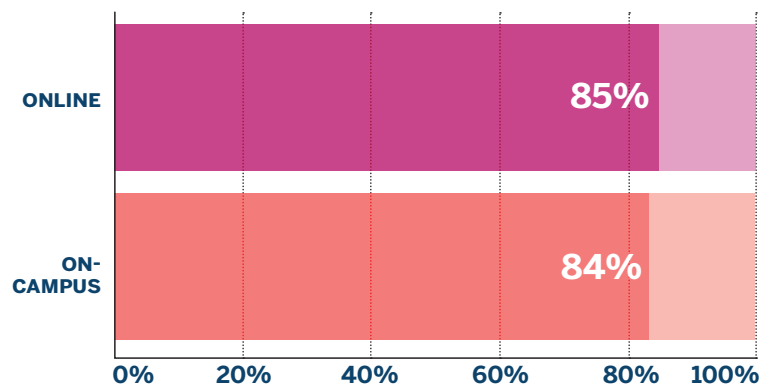
| Modality | Completion |
|----------|-----------|
| ONLINE | 85% |
| ON-CAMPUS | 84% |

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on the percentage of students enrolled in mental and behavioral health programs who complete their degree requirements broken down by modality.

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**6** *Council of Graduate Schools. Master's Completion Project. Available at https://cgsnet.org/project/masters-completion-project*
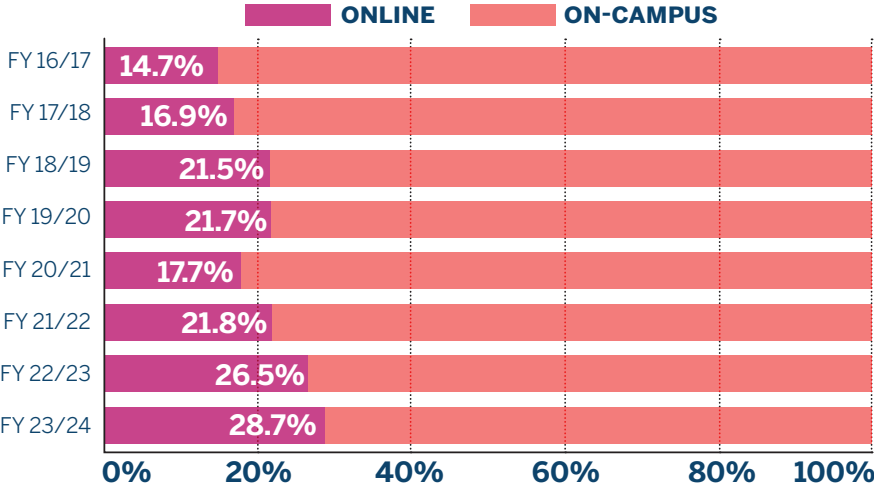
**7** *Based on the time it can take an individual to complete degree coursework on a part-time basis, only data from Fall 2019 to Spring 2021 has been reported here.*

## INCREASING PROPORTION OF MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DEGREES AWARDED TO ONLINE STUDENTS

Understanding the proportion of all degrees awarded to online students can provide valuable information on student interest in these programs. Among IU mental and behavioral health graduates, the share of degrees issued to online students has steadily increased, rising from 15% in FY 16/17 to 29% in FY23/24. This is consistent with the increases in enrollment seen earlier. Students are not only enrolling in these programs more but also completing all requirements and earning their degrees.
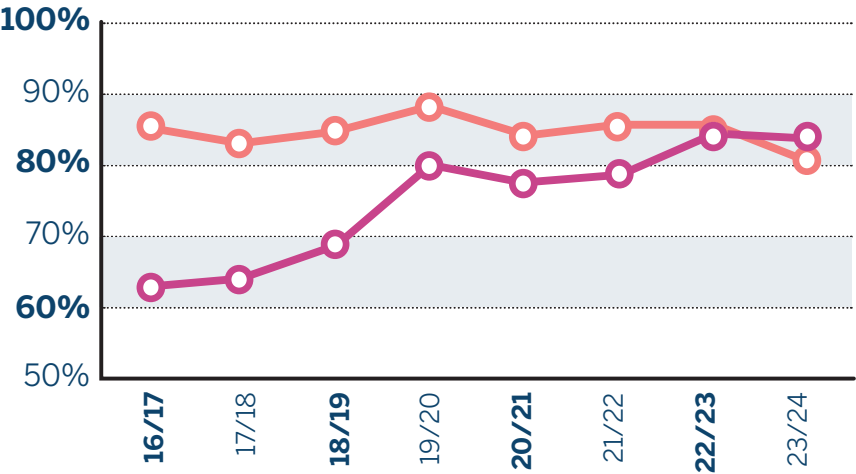
### DEGREES AWARDED
#### FROM ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

**ONLINE**  **ON-CAMPUS**

| Fiscal Year | Online % |
|---|---|
| FY 16/17 | 14.7% |
| FY 17/18 | 16.9% |
| FY 18/19 | 21.5% |
| FY 19/20 | 21.7% |
| FY 20/21 | 17.7% |
| FY 21/22 | 21.8% |
| FY 22/23 | 26.5% |
| FY 23/24 | 28.7% |

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data (Fiscal Year) on the percentage of students enrolled in mental and behavioral health programs who were awarded degrees by modality.

### % DEGREES AWARED TO INDIANA RESIDENTS
#### ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

**ONLINE**  **ON-CAMPUS**

**Source:** Indiana University institutional data on the percentage of mental and behavioral health degrees awarded to Indiana resident students by modality.

## INTERSECTION OF DEVELOPING THE WORKFORCE FOR INDIANA AND STUDENT SUCCESS: GREATER PROPORTION OF HOOSIER STUDENTS EARNING DEGREES

The proportion of degrees awarded to Hoosier students in online MBH programs has steadily increased from 63% in FY 16/17 to 84% in FY 23/24. For the first time in FY 23/24, online programs awarded a higher percentage of mental and behavioral health degrees to Hoosier graduates than on-campus MBH programs. This is an important intersection that shows IU Online is developing Hoosier talent and ensuring successful completion of education.

# CONCLUSION

This brief highlights how IU's online programs contribute to developing the next generation of Indiana's mental and behavioral health workforce and ensuring successful student outcomes. A summary of key findings is included below.

1. More students are enrolling in online mental and behavioral programs with a 60% increase since fall 2019.

2. More Indiana residents are enrolling in online MBH programs, increasing from 80% to 90% of online MBH enrollment over 5 years.

3. Enrollment of students from rural Indiana in online mental and behavioral health programs have increased 63% since fall 2019.

4. IU's online mental and behavioral health programs reach students in 71% of Indiana's counties.

5. About half of online MBH students pursue part-time courseloads, allowing them to further their education while fulfilling other responsibilities and serving their communities.

6. Online MBH students have strong academic performance as evidenced by consistently higher average semester GPAs than on-campus MBH students.

7. Fall semester attrition rates for online MBH students are estimated to be 3-5%, almost half as much as national estimates for similar programs.

8. Almost thirty percent of all MBH degrees were awarded to online students in 2023.

9. 84% of online MBH degrees in FY 23/24 were awarded to Hoosier residents.

IU's online programs have been and continue to make significant contributions to educating mental and behavioral health professionals, particularly those who are Indiana residents. This is more critical now than ever before as demand for these professionals continues to grow. By offering flexible learning options and maintaining high academic standards through online programs, IU is helping to ensure that more students can achieve their educational goals and contribute to the mental and behavioral health workforce.

IU's model of partnering academic expertise with strong administrative support through IU Online is proving to be very effective at extending educational opportunities to the broader state.