

Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The racial and ethnic makeup of the United States has changed substantially since the country's founding, with dramatic changes occurring in just the last 20 years. It is well known that the over 50 percent of students from communities of color in public K–12 schools will, in the very near future, be the majority of the U.S. adult population. Racial and ethnic diversity comes with a host of benefits at all levels of education and in the workforce—greater productivity, innovation, and cultural competency, to name a few. Moreover, the current and future health of our nation—economic and otherwise—requires that the whole of our population have equitable access to sources of opportunity.

Chief among such sources of opportunity is higher education. It is therefore imperative that educators, policymakers, community leaders, members of the media, and others have access to timely data on one of the most salient predictors of higher education access and success in this country: race and ethnicity.

To be clear, there are myriad factors that inform educational access and success, such as income, wealth, geography, and age. Yet it remains the case—as the data in this and other studies show—that race is a prevailing factor in many educational outcomes. This report examines over 200 indicators, looking at who gains access to a variety of educational environments and experiences, and how these trajectories and their outcomes differ by race and ethnicity.

These data provide a foundation from which the higher education community and its many stakeholders can draw insights, raise new questions, and make the case for why race still matters in American higher education. When considering the data on the whole, we offer the following key takeaways.

Over the past two decades, the U.S. population has grown not only more educated but also more racially and ethnically diverse, thanks in large part to a growing Hispanic population that is seeking higher education at levels not before seen.

As the U.S. population has grown more racially and ethnically diverse, so too have students across all levels of higher education. The Hispanic population's growing numbers and rising postsecondary enrollment rates figured centrally in both trends. While much progress has been made for nearly all groups, we nonetheless see stagnant and low levels of secondary school completion, college participation, and educational attainment for many communities of color.

- In 2017, 44.5 percent of the total population ages 25 and older had attained an associate degree or higher, an increase from 31.1 percent in 1997. For Hispanics in 2017, each 10-year age cohort had higher rates of college attainment than the next-oldest group.
- Asian adults had the highest levels of educational attainment in 2017, with 30.7 percent holding a bachelor's degree and another 24.7 percent holding an advanced degree. By contrast and despite steadily rising attainment, Hispanic men and women and American Indian or Alaska Native men had the lowest levels of educational attainment, with most holding a high school credential or less (ranging from 54.5 percent among American Indian or Alaska Native men to 63.4 percent among Hispanic men).
- African American,¹ American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander populations each exhibited low college enrollment rates among secondary school completers of traditional college-going age and were a disproportionately older population of undergraduates.
- On an encouraging note, students of color who received a bachelor's degree in 2007–08 were more likely than their White peers to enter graduate education within four years. Specifically, 43.8 percent of White bachelor's degree recipients enrolled in graduate school, compared with 61.3 percent of Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, 57.7 percent of African Americans, and 57.2 percent of bachelor's degree recipients of more than one race.¹ The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably.

Too many Black students fare poorly in America's postsecondary education system. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, advances in Black students' enrollment and attainment have been accompanied by some of the lowest persistence rates, highest undergraduate dropout rates, highest borrowing rates, and largest debt burdens of any group.

In 2016, Black students accounted for a larger share of secondary school completers, undergraduate and graduate students, and graduate completers than was the case 20 years prior. Yet these encouraging gains are too often overshadowed by outcomes that reflect the effects of systemic and structural barriers that can limit or eliminate opportunity for Black students, families, and communities, as well as for our nation at large.

- Black students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs exhibited lower rates of first-year persistence and higher rates of dropping out than any other racial or ethnic group. Moreover, the gender gap in enrollment for Black students remained the widest of any group. In 2016, 62.2 percent of Black undergraduates and 70.2 percent of Black graduate students were women.
- Black undergraduates were more likely than others to receive federal grants and loans, but graduated with the greatest student loan debt of any group. The 86.4 percent of Black 2016 bachelor's degree recipients who borrowed owed an average of \$34,010 by graduation, compared with \$29,669 for all bachelor's degree recipients. The 67.2 percent of Black associate degree recipients who borrowed owed an average of \$22,303, compared with \$18,501 for students overall.
- Patterns of borrowing among African American graduate students are deeply concerning, especially among those at the nation's for-profit colleges, which enrolled approximately 50 percent of Black doctoral students in 2016. The vast majority (95.2 percent) of Black

doctoral recipients who attended these schools borrowed an average amount of \$128,359 for graduate study.

- Even with a bachelor's degree in hand, African Americans ages 25 to 34 earned 15 percent less and had an unemployment rate two-thirds higher than the typical bachelor's degree holder of similar age.

We still lack precise, national data on many educational outcomes for American Indians or Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders; but what the available data do show is troubling.

While some important information is available, federal data preclude precise estimates of many key benchmarks for a relatively small and heterogeneous Native population. As a result, we still don't know enough about indigenous students' secondary school completion rates or graduate enrollment, or how they fund their college education. The data we can observe show troubling, persistent equity gaps in educational and labor-market outcomes for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students when compared with other groups.

- In 2016, high school graduates of American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander descent enrolled in college at less than half the average rate. Only 18.8 percent and 20.4 percent, respectively, were enrolled in college, as compared with 40.9 percent of all high school completers ages 18 to 24.
- American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander undergraduates were less likely than undergraduates of any other group to attend a four-year institution, attend a very selective college, or pursue a bachelor's degree.
- At the graduate level, a higher share of American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students than of all graduate students completed degrees at for-profit institutions. Among graduates of for-profit institutions, 74.4 percent of 2016 master's degree recipients who borrowed accrued an average debt of \$48,829, and the 87.9 percent of 2016 doctoral degree recipients who borrowed accrued an average debt of \$120,110. These debt levels were higher than those of students who completed graduate degrees at public and private nonprofit four-year institutions.
- American Indian or Alaska Native adults earned substantially less than adults with comparable levels of educational attainment. Within every level of postsecondary attainment, the median annual earnings of American Indian or Alaska Native adults were between 16.2 percent and 28.5 percent less than the national median in 2016.

Great differences exist by race, ethnicity, and gender in where students go to college and what they study, signaling an uneven playing field in the labor market and a threat to the opportunity for intergenerational upward mobility.

Where and how students go to school matters, as does what they study. While it is understandable that students experience our country's diverse set of colleges and universities differently given college readiness, family background, and life stage, we should be concerned when educational opportunities are distributed along racial and ethnic lines.

- With the exception of Asian students, larger shares of undergraduate and graduate students of color enrolled in, and completed degrees at, for-profit institutions. This was particularly true of Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students.
- In every income quartile, Black undergraduates were less likely than members of any other racial or ethnic group to attend a very selective institution, and Black undergraduates were among the least likely to enroll in and complete an associate degree or bachelor's degree in the lucrative STEM fields, at any institution.
- As a group, Hispanic undergraduates were among the most likely to pursue and complete an associate degree. However, they were the least likely to complete their degree in health care fields. Among select occupational fields, health care fields have the largest observed earnings gap between high school and associate degree completers (\$19,240).
- Larger shares of American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic undergraduates than of other groups were enrolled in public two-year and open-admission four-year institutions.

How students pay for higher education varied considerably by race and ethnicity, especially in terms of who borrows and who leaves college with high levels of student loan debt.

In 2016, 70.3 percent of undergraduates completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and 37.3 percent borrowed federal direct loans to pay for college. Yet patterns of financing postsecondary education varied markedly by race and ethnicity. The most notable and consistent finding that emerged from the data was that Black students were most likely to borrow and accrue larger debts than other students, with Asian and Hispanic students the least likely to borrow. These patterns held within types of institutions, dependent student status, and family income quartile.

- Asian undergraduates were consistently among the least likely of any group to take out loans: 67.5 percent applied for aid and only 26.0 percent borrowed in 2016. Hispanic undergraduates also borrowed at lower-than-average rates and accrued lower-than-average debts, whereas Black students were more likely to borrow and left college with higher-than-average debts, regardless of income.
- As one would suspect, lower-income undergraduates were more likely than their upper-income peers to borrow to pay for college, but lower-income borrowers took on nearly as much debt as more affluent ones. Among dependent bachelor's recipients, 57.3 percent of upper-income students borrowed an average amount of \$27,515, while 74.1 percent of low-income students borrowed an average amount of \$24,836.
- At every degree level and within almost every racial and ethnic group, those who received degrees from for-profit institutions borrowed at higher rates and accumulated larger debts than completers who enrolled in other sectors. For instance, 87.4 percent of associate degree completers at for-profit institutions borrowed an average amount of \$26,231 to pay for college, compared with 40.4 percent of associate degree completers at public two-year institutions, who borrowed an average amount of \$15,486.

Racial and ethnic diversity among college faculty, staff, and administrators still doesn't reflect that of today's college students.

People of color make up a larger share of postsecondary students than ever before. Between 1996 and 2016, the non-White share of undergraduates grew from 29.6 percent to 45.2 percent, while the non-White share of graduate students grew from 20.8 percent to 32.0 percent. Even so, college faculty, staff, and administrators remain predominantly White.

- In 2016, people of color held only 21.1 percent of full-time faculty positions, and faculty of color were less likely than White faculty to hold full professorships.
- Although the non-White share of college and university presidents more than doubled between 1986 and 2016, people of color still held only 16.8 percent of all presidencies in 2016. Women of color held only 5.1 percent of all presidencies.
- Students were more likely to encounter people of color in service roles than in faculty or leadership positions. While people of color represented less than one-fifth of senior executives, 42.2 percent of service and maintenance staff and one-third of campus safety personnel were people of color.
- Among college and university administrators, chief student affairs and student life officers were the most diverse positions on campus, with a little more than one-quarter of individuals in these positions identifying as a racial or ethnic group other than White.
- Among college and university professional staff, more than one in four student affairs professionals and slightly more than one in five academic affairs professionals identified as non-White.

Espinosa, L. L., Turk, J. M., Taylor, M., & Chessman, H. M. (2019). Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report. American Council on Education and the Andrew F. Mellon Foundation