

Hard Choices in Higher Education

Compared with a decade ago, more young people in Texas today are graduating from high school well prepared for college-level classes. These graduates are not only attending universities in ever-greater numbers but also completing college degrees.

Despite these gains, however, student performance in the state is still low, according to a report from two researchers in Penn's Graduate School of Education (GSE). Texas students fall below the national average on most performance measures. In addition, there are substantial gaps in performance by race and income.

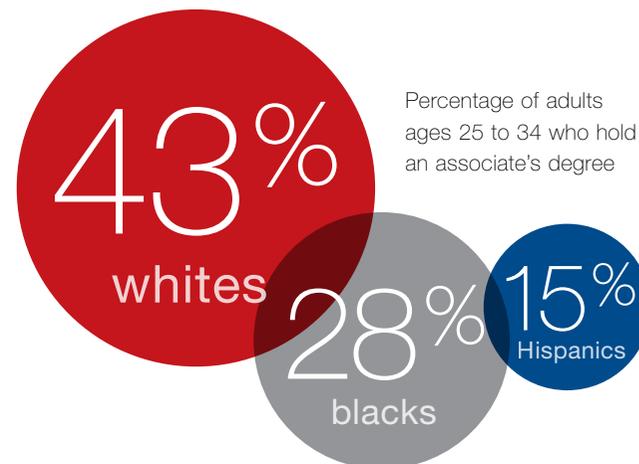
Joni Finney, professor of practice in GSE, director of the Institute for Research on Higher Education, and co-author of the report, "Hard Choices Ahead: Performance and Policy in Texas Higher Education," says that the state's business community has urged lawmakers to take these problems seriously—and the legislature has responded.

"[Texas] realized its population was changing and if they didn't invest in this growing population, the state doesn't have much of a future," Finney says. "Now, will their strategy work to fix it? There are some real issues."

Texas, like many other states, does not have a fiscal plan to address its educational challenges. Other goals for higher education may compete for limited fiscal resources. For example, Finney and Laura Perna, a professor in GSE and co-author of the report, found that Texas hopes to repurpose public monies to expand the state university's research capacity. They say this is an

expensive project that may divert funds from programs designed to close achievement gaps and increase college readiness and enrollment.

"Money does matter," Perna says. "We also need a more intentional approach to how the money is being allocated and directed so as to



achieve the educational attainment goals that are so important for individual states and the nation."

Texas is one of five states that Finney and Perna examined in order to understand the relationship between public policy and higher education performance. In addition to Texas, they studied Illinois, Georgia, Washington, and Maryland—states with racially diverse populations, different geographic locales, a relatively high number of students enrolled in community colleges, and at least one major urban center.

Finney and Perna issued reports on each state, and a cross-state analysis is forthcoming.

They say it is clear that all states must improve higher education performance to reach the levels of educational attainment required for future jobs.

"There is a crisis in state policy leadership in higher education," says Finney. "We don't know all the answers about how to do all this well, but we know enough to improve performance dramatically. I think what we don't have is the political consensus and political strategy to take this issue on."

Perna adds that a more comprehensive approach is required to acknowledge the particular needs of a population and location, noting, "There is no silver bullet."

Moreover, the particular policies that work in Texas to close the often-discussed racial and educational achievement gap may not work in Georgia, for example, a state with a different higher education system, as well as a distinct political and economic context.

"I'm worried about the lack of progress on improving students' academic readiness, the steady increases in tuition, and the ways that states are using the financial aid dollars that are available," says Perna. "Political leadership is needed to use the many available policy levers to increase educational attainment and close gaps in attainment across groups—outcomes that are important to individuals and our society." ■

Texas ranks
39th

among states in the share of adults ages 25 and older who have earned at least an associate's degree, at 32%.

Yet by 2018, 56% of all jobs in Texas are projected to require some kind of postsecondary education or training.