

Research Fact Sheet

Improving College Access and Success for Students From Historically Underrepresented Groups

By 2020, 65% of jobs are projected to require education beyond high school, up from 28% in 1973. At the current rate of degree production, the demand for workers with at least an associate's degree will, by 2020, exceed the supply by 5 million (Carnevale et al., 2013). The U.S. led the world in 2000, in the share of adults age 25 to 34 who held at least a bachelor's type of postsecondary degree. Today higher education attainment in the U.S. lags behind several other nations, including Norway, Poland, the Netherlands, U.K., Korea, and Finland (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). The U.S. cannot achieve the level of educational attainment that is required for workforce readiness or international competitiveness without closing the considerable gaps in higher education attainment that persist across demographic groups (Perna & Finney, 2014).

There are significant racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic disparities in higher education attainment.

- Attention only to the nation's overall higher education attainment masks the considerably lower rates of attainment for students from, among others, three groups: low-income families, students who are first in their families to attend or complete college, and students from racial and ethnic minority groups (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).
 - In 2012, among adults age 25 to 29, only 15% of Hispanics and 23% of Blacks age 25 to 29 held at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 40% of Whites and 60% of Asians (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).
 - Higher education attainment is even lower for males than females within each racial/ethnic group. In 2012, only 19% of Black men and 12% of Hispanic men age 25 to 29 had attained at least a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).
 - Raising higher education attainment of Hispanics is especially important, as Hispanics are among the fastest growing racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2012).
- Higher education attainment also varies across and within states.
 - In 2012 the share of adults age 25 to 34 who had attained at least an associate's degree ranged from a low of 30% in Nevada to a high of 55% in Massachusetts (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, n.d.)

What do we know from research about the college attainment process?

- Higher education attainment is the result of a longitudinal and cumulative process that arguably begins at birth. As such, there are multiple points along the pipeline for intervention (Perna & Thomas, 2008; Perna & Jones, 2013).

- Human capital theory assumes that individuals make college-related decisions based on a comparison of the costs with the benefits. A review of available research (Perna, 2006) illustrates that, consistent with the tenets of human capital theory, the primary predictors of college access and success are:
 - Academic preparation to enroll and succeed in college.
 - Financial resources to pay the costs of college enrollment and persistence.
 - Information about college and support in navigating college-related processes.
- Students' college-related decisions are influenced by the contexts in which students are embedded. Relevant contexts include a student's family, high school and college(s) attended, and the state and nation in which a student lives. These contexts are influenced by policies and practices of K–12 schools, colleges and universities, and state and federal governments (Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013).
 - The opportunity to become adequately academically prepared for college and careers varies dramatically based on the characteristics of the high school attended. High schools vary in the availability of academically rigorous coursework, high school counselors, and other resources that promote higher education attainment (Perna, 2005; Perna et al., 2015).

What is the role of public policy in closing gaps in higher education attainment?

- Federal and state government intervention in the higher education market is justified, given the public benefits of higher education and the societal value of creating a more level playing field for higher education (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Perna & Finney, 2014).

Federal policy

- In 2014–15, undergraduates nationwide received \$183.8 billion in student financial aid from all sources, including tax credits (College Board, 2015). About 16% of all aid dollars received by undergraduates in 2014–15 was in the form of federal Pell Grants (\$30.3 billion) and 34% was in the form of federal loans (\$62.1 billion) (College Board, 2015).
- Need-based grants are especially important to promoting college-related outcomes for students from low-income families (Mundel, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2004).
- In 2014–15 about 14% of loan recipients and 9% of loan dollars were in default (College Board, 2015). Loans are especially problematic for borrowers who do not complete their educational programs (Gladieux & Perna, 2005).

State policy

- While the federal government plays an important role, individual states have the primary responsibility for the policies and structures that will increase higher education attainment and close gaps in attainment across groups. In-depth case studies of the relationship between public policy and higher education attainment in five states reveal several lessons (Perna & Finney, 2014):
 - The relationship between state public policy and higher education attainment

depends on a state's historical, demographic, political, economic, and cultural context, as well as the characteristics of the higher education institutions, structures, and policies that are currently in place.

- Improving higher education attainment and closing gaps across groups in higher education attainment requires attention to three categories of policies:
 - ❖ Policies that ensure that all students can pay the costs of attending college, including: state appropriations to higher education institutions, tuition setting policies, and student financial aid policies.
 - ❖ Policies that ensure that students can move from K12 to higher education and transfer across higher education institutions without loss of academic credit.
 - ❖ Policies that ensure the availability and accessibility of high-quality higher education options for all state residents.
- State policy leadership is needed to steer higher education institutions toward raising higher education attainment and closing gaps in attainment.
- Improving higher education attainment and closing gaps in attainment is an ongoing process that requires regularly monitoring, assessing, and making adjustments that will increase the effectiveness of public policies.

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