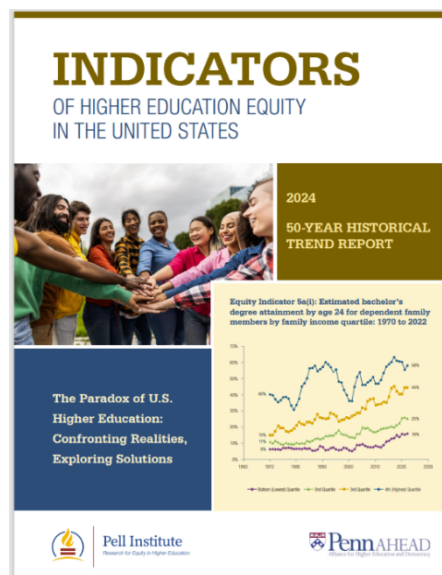


Executive Summary

Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States 2024: 50-Year Historical Trend Report

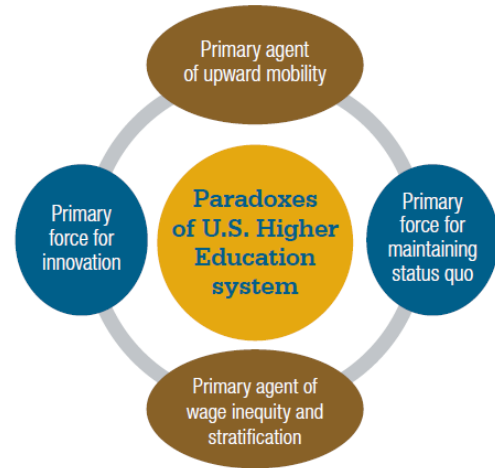
The alarms are sounding for the U.S., but it's not too late to put our hands together to ensure each person's right to higher education within a paradigm of inclusive excellence.

As we approach the completion of the first quarter of the 21st century, the United States is at a crossroads regarding higher education. The 21st century's knowledge-based global economy requires highly educated workers to understand and address current challenges; and in this knowledge economy, postsecondary education is increasingly required to provide families with a living wage. However, the Equity Indicator trend data in this report continue to show increasing inequity of opportunity, with the result that many students, especially low-income students, are excluded from a realistic chance to earn a college degree. Moreover, the declines in levels of federal and state support relative to college costs have resulted in a new system of indenture in which incurring considerable debt is the only pathway to a degree. For many low-income students, the cost-benefit calculation makes entry into college and persisting to completion just not worth it.



Moreover, as Equity Indicator 5h(v) shows, the “chance for a college degree” varies considerably based on the U.S. state in which you live. Differences in education attainment rates and associated economic differences have increased in the 21st century, such that the percentages of the population with college degrees in some states is now double that of other states (STS Figure 7e). Each state has its own unique structures for politics, education, finance/economy, demographic composition, and culture, resulting in substantial 21st-century differences in higher educational attainment among the states.

A major theme for this year’s 2024 Shared Solutions Dialogue is “The Paradox of U.S. Higher Education: Confronting Realities, Exploring Solutions.” We explore the paradox that higher education is a major agent for providing the opportunity for increased mobility and well-being, but paradoxically, in the competitive commodity higher education model, it has also become a major means of furthering stratification and inequality. Higher education is also a major agent of innovation and change to help provide solutions to the global challenges faced in today’s society, but at the same time it is a major legitimizer of the status quo of increased success for the successful and of exclusionary geo-political and economic divides.



On many issues, these growing disparities contribute to an increasingly divided country. Moreover, the lack of public government support has dampened the growth in postsecondary attainment and the global position of the United States. As Indicator 6a shows, in just 20 years, the U.S. has fallen from 2nd in bachelor’s attainment to 18th among 39 countries tracked by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD statistics show rapid growth in many developed countries following deliberate policy decisions to widen participation, especially among lower-income, first-generation families. These countries have intentionally set clear goals to widen participation and have provided generous financial incentives combined with holistic support services to attain these goals. Observing the progress of these countries gives reasons for hope. The U.S. has the postsecondary infrastructure in place. What is needed is a coming together to support a higher education system that provides each person with the right to develop their talents to become contributory citizens. This is more than a desirable goal to achieve equity: In a global economy faced with numerous challenges, the U.S. cannot afford to ignore these “national security” concerns posed by income and educational disparities. The 2024 Equity Indicators Historical Trend Report allows us to step back and observe how we arrived at this juncture as a nation, considering where we were, where we are now, and where we might hope to be in the future.

This report is released in the spirit of the UNESCO [Right to Higher Education \(RTHE\) Project](#) that promotes the principle of *Universal Access to Higher Education*. The UNESCO publication, *The Right to Higher Education a Social Justice Perspective*, outlines a new evolving social justice and lifelong learning framework. The paradigm calls for a non-zero-sum game in which gains for one individual, gender, race/ethnicity, SES group, state, or country do not mean less opportunity for the other person, community, or state. The report calls for a higher education system that redefines merit, and a conceptual framework of *Inclusive Excellence* with a focus on “*equity deserving students*” who have been systematically excluded from equal access to higher

education.¹ As the cover photo for the 2024 50-Year Historical Report shows, we need a collective commitment *to ensure each person's right to higher education within a paradigm of inclusive excellence*. In 1967, in a talk entitled “Where Do We Go from Here?” Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that: “There is no deficit in human resources, the deficit is in human will.”² Below we present highlights of the *2024 Indicators of Higher Education 2024: 50-Year Historical Trend Report*.

Setting the Stage (STS): The Wider Context of Inequity in the United States

- **Rising Income Inequality.** Since 1967, household incomes have stagnated, rising only for those in the highest income groups. In 2022, the highest fifth quintile accounted for 52 percent of the U.S. income, an amount greater than the lowest 80 percent combined. The lowest income quintile accounted for 3 percent, the second, 8 percent, the third 14 percent, and fourth quintile (23 percent) (STS 8c).
- **Disparities in Wealth by Race/Ethnicity.** In constant 2022 dollars, between 1983 and 2019, the median family wealth rose from \$93,523 to \$115,388. However, the overall medians mask the stark contrast by race/ethnicity. In 2022 dollars, White families’ median wealth was \$183,384; yet, starkly for Black and Hispanic families, their median wealth was \$10,302 and \$16,026 respectively (STS 8b(ii)).
- **Increasing Differences by State in Educational Attainment.** Rates of bachelor’s degree attainment in the highest attainment states are now twice the rates in the lowest attainment states. In 2022, the percentage of the population age 25 and older with at least a bachelor’s degree ranged from 23 percent in West Virginia, 25 percent in Mississippi, 27 percent in Arkansas, 28 percent in Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Alabama, to 49 percent in Maryland, 51 percent in Massachusetts, and was highest at 68 percent in the District of Columbia. (STS Figure 7e)
- **Median Household Income by State Linked to Attainment.** Median household income is strongly associated with the educational attainment of the state’s population. In 2022, median family income ranged from \$48,610 in Mississippi and \$52,460 in West Virginia to \$101,700 in the District of Columbia, and Maryland (\$108,200). (STS Figure 8e)
- **Increased Percentage of Low-Income Students.** An increasing percentage of K-12 students are from low-income families. The percentage of K-12 students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunches rose from 31 percent in 1989 to 57 percent in 2020. (STS Figure 6a).
- **Recent Declines in Enrollment Sharpest Among Low-Income Students.** Undergraduate enrollment increased sharply during the Great Recession, rising from 15.6 million in fall 2007 to a peak of 18.1 million in fall 2010, then fell each year to a recent low of 15.5 million

¹ Sabzalieva, E., Gallegos, D., Yerovi, C., Chacon, E., Mutize, T., Morales, D., & Cuadros, J. (2022). The right to higher education: A social justice perspective. UNESCO <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381750>

² Especially in the final years of his life, Dr. King increasingly spoke of the interrelationships between civil rights and education, the economic system, poverty, militarism, and racism. <https://kairoscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/King-quotes-2-page.pdf>.

in 2021. NCES projections for 2024 are slightly higher at 16.1 million (STS Figure 3). The number of Pell Grant recipients also peaked in 2011 at 9.4 million, then fell sharply and was at 6.0 million in 2022 (Equity Indicator 3b(iv)). Declines during COVID and recovery afterwards were felt most acutely among low-income students. Most of the recent economic or COVID-based changes in enrollment have been among low-income students, not those from higher family-income quartiles.

- **Role of Job Availability in Postsecondary Enrollment Decisions.** One of the factors affecting the decisions to go to college and persist is the potential for employment within reach of students. Among the 50 states, using BLS data, the percentage of persons employed in jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher ranges from a low of 22 percent in Mississippi, a state among those with the lowest bachelor's degree attainment, to a high of 37 percent in Massachusetts, a state with the highest rate of bachelor's attainment (STS 7f(i) and 7f(ii)).
- **In Many States, the Majority of Jobs Available Increasingly Do Not Pay a Living Wage.** BLS data also indicate that jobs that do not require any postsecondary education remained at 60 percent of the available jobs (projected to decline only slightly to 59 percent by 2032). On average, despite the fact that these jobs are often essential for the wellbeing of society, many of these jobs, unjustly, do not pay a living wage. This makes it increasingly difficult for these families to afford college for their children, even with some financial assistance. The fact that these jobs comprise most of the jobs currently available in some areas of the country contributes to an increasing divide among the population by state of residence.

Equity Indicator 1: Who Enrolls in Postsecondary Education?

- **Postsecondary Education Enrollment is Stratified by Parent Socio-Economic Status (SES).** In 2022, an estimated 79 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds from the highest family income quartile enrolled in postsecondary education, compared with 44 percent in the lowest quartile (Equity Indicator 1a).
- **College Entrance Rates by Parents' Educational Attainment.** In 2016, college attendance rates for 3 years after leaving high school ranged from 92 percent for students in the highest SES quintile to 53 percent among those in the lowest family SES quintile. (Equity Indicator 1g(ii)).
- **First-Generation College Students.** In 2020, 54 percent of undergraduate students were first-generation college, defined as neither parent had obtained a bachelor's degree (Equity Indicator 1h(ii)). About 28 percent of undergraduates had parents who had some college but had not completed a bachelor's degree. (Equity Indicator 1h(ii)).

Equity Indicator 2: What Types of Postsecondary Institutions Do Students Attend?

- **Stratification of Enrollment by Family SES is Stark and Persists.** Students from the highest SES quintile are 8 times as likely to attend a "most" or "highly" competitive institution, compared to students from the lowest quintile (33 percent vs. 4 percent). (Equity Indicator 2f).

- **Inverse Relationship Between the Selectivity of the Institution and Percent of Pell Grant Recipients.** In 2020, among the Most Competitive Institutions, an average of 28 percent of enrolled students received Pell Grants, compared to an average of 73 percent receiving Pell Grants at the least competitive for-profit institutions. (Equity Indicator 2e).

Equity Indicator 3: Do Amounts of Financial Aid and Differences in College Costs Eliminate the Barriers to College Equity?

- **Growth in Unmet Financial Need by Income Quartile and Dependency Status.** In constant 2022 dollars, dependent students from the lowest family-income quartile averaged \$18,436 in unmet needs after all grants and discounts (but not loans) were considered. In the same time period, dependent students from the highest income quartile had a surplus of +\$34,218 (Equity Indicators 3c(i) and 3c(ii)).
- **Federal Financial Aid Has Not Kept Pace with Rising College Costs.** In the early days of the Pell Grant program, the aid was able to cover about two-thirds of the average college costs. However, by 2022, the proportion has fallen to 25 percent of college costs (Equity Indicator 3b(ii)). If the Pell Grant were to have been restored for the maximum to cover two-thirds of the average college costs in 2022-23, it would need to be raised to \$18,541 rather than \$6,895 (Equity Indicator 3b(iii)).
- **Pell Grants Make Up a Very Small Part of the Federal Yearly Budget.** In 2022, over 6 million low-income students received federal Pell Grant awards at a yearly cost of \$28 billion. To put this number in perspective, the defense budget of \$877 billion in 2022 was 31 times higher (Appendix Figure A-5).
- **Large Inequity in Education and Related Expenditures per Full-Time Equivalent Student by Institution Selectivity.** In 2022 dollars, Highly Selective Institutions averaged \$59,673 in Education & Related (E&R) expenditures per Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) student compared to \$17,108 in E&R spending per FTE student at Broad Access institutions (Equity Indicator 3d(i)).
- **Pell Grant Recipients Tend to Be in Low-Resourced Institutions.** The Majority of Pell Grant recipients are in institutions in the lower two E&R spending quintiles, and only 9 percent are in the E&R highest spending per student quintile (Equity Indicator 3d(iii)).

Equity Indicator 4: How Do Students in the United States Pay for College?

- **The Amount of Public Funding Relative to College Costs Has Been Declining Since 1980.** The period since 1980 shows an increasing shift in financing for postsecondary education from public funding to students and their families at the same time that an increasing number of families have fewer resources to pay for college. The share of higher education expenditures paid by students and families increased from one-third (33 percent) in the late 1970s to almost half (46 percent) in 2022. (Equity Indicator 4a(i)).
- **Impossible Ratio of Family Income to Net Price of College.** Although low-income students on average attend lower-priced colleges, by 2020, the net price of college attendance, after all grants and discounts were considered, represented a stark 90 percent of average family income in the lowest family-income quartile (Indicator 4b(ii)).
- **Increases in the Percentage of Students Who Must Borrow** Use of loans among bachelor's degree completers has increased in the last thirty years among all students, with the loan burden falling most heavily on racial/ethnic minorities. Black bachelor's completers have the highest percentages of students who must borrow (83 percent) and the highest amount borrowed for bachelor's degrees (\$37,230 in 2022 dollars) (Equity Indicator 4d(ia&b)).
- **Debt Gap Between Blacks and White Graduates Grows Due to Graduate School and Payment Deferment.** Black bachelor's degree recipients are attending graduate school at high rates, but also incurring more debt. For example, in 2022 dollars, 10 years after being awarded a bachelor's degree, Black students had borrowed an average of \$71,904 and White graduates \$39,740 to finance their undergraduate and graduate education. This data represents a Black-White gap of \$32,64 (Indicator 4e(va&b)).

Equity Indicator 5: How Do Educational Attainment Rates and Outcomes Vary by Student Characteristics?

- **Large Change in Distribution of Bachelor's Degrees Conferred by Sex.** Over the last 150 years, the change in the distribution of bachelor's degrees conferred by sex has reflected shifts in the global labor market structure and significant historical events. In 1869, about 9,371 bachelor's degrees were awarded, of which 85 percent were conferred on males and 15 percent on females. By 2021, bachelor's degrees grew to just over 2 million, with 42 percent awarded to males and 58 percent to females (Equity Indicator 5a(iii&b)).
- **Persistent Inequality by Family Income in Degree Attainment.** Since 1970, there has been an increase in bachelor's degrees attained by age 24 for all income quartiles, but the distribution by family income quartile remains highly unequal. In 2022, estimated bachelor's degree attainment rates were almost 4 times higher for dependent family members in the highest income quartile than those in the lowest (58 percent vs. 16 percent) (Equity Indicator 5a(i)).
- **Chance of Completion Strongly Related to Family Income and Parent Education.** Most low-income and first-generation students entering college at both 2-year and 4-year colleges report they expect and hope to obtain a bachelor's degree; however, the reality is that the majority will not be able to attain their goal within 6 years. Among dependent students who

first enrolled in 2011-12, 6-year bachelor's degree completion rates by 2017 were 45 percentage points lower for both low-income and first-generation students than for those who were neither low-income nor first-generation (21 percent versus 66 percent). (Equity Indicator 5c(iii)).

- **Degree Completion Variation by Dependency Status.** By 2017, six years after first enrolling in a 4-year or 2-year institution, 60 percent of dependent students and 38 percent of independent students had attained a postsecondary credential, with 45 percent of dependent students and 9 percent of independent students earning a bachelor's degree. Among independent students, 29 percent earned a degree below the bachelor's and among dependent students, 15 percent earned a degree below the bachelor's (Equity Indicator 5c(iv)).

Equity Indicator 6: How Does Tertiary Educational Attainment in the U.S. Compare with Other Countries?

- **In the Last Two Decades, the U.S. Has Had Lower Rates of Increase in Bachelor's Degree Attainment Compared to Other Countries.** In two decades, the U.S. has fallen in ranking among OECD countries reporting bachelor's attainment information for adults aged 25 to 34. In 2002, the U.S. ranked 2nd out of 30 OECD countries on this indicator, but in 2022, the U.S. ranked 18 out of 39 countries. Over the two decades, the U.S. had a 34 percent increase in bachelor's attainment for adults aged 25 to 34; however, in comparison, the countries that outranked the U.S. experienced an average 119 percent rate of increase in bachelor's attainment. (Equity Indicator 6a).

Equity Indicator 7: The Federal TRIO Programs: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How Does the TRIO Program Work?

- **Number of Projects and Participants.** A strength of TRIO projects is that they are in every state and territory, serving over 880,000 students yearly in one of the 3,500 Federal TRIO projects across the nation (Equity Indicator 7a(i to iii)).
- **National studies have consistently shown that participation in TRIO substantially increases college entrance, persistence, completion, and graduate school enrollment among low-income, first-generation, and students with disabilities.**
 - For example, Talent Search (TS) with 80 percent college entrance, Upward Bound (UB) with 85 percent entrance, and Upward Bound Math-Science (UBMS) with 89 percent college entrance far exceed the national average of 45-50 percent for the lower half of the family income distribution (Equity Indicator 7c(iii)).
 - Likewise, in repeated national studies, UB participants have been found to be 2 to 3 times as likely to attain a bachelor's degree in 6 years when compared to similar students not receiving comparable services (Equity Indicator 7c(iv)).
 - Looking at the support programs for students already enrolled in college, Student Support Services (SSS) participants at 2-year colleges were 78 percent more likely to complete an associate degree, certificate, or transfer to a 4-year college (50 percent

- for SSS participants vs. 28 percent for the national sample) and SSS participants at 4-year colleges were 24 percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Equity Indicator 7d(ii)).
- TRIO McNair Scholars have a 64 percent graduate school entrance rate, compared with a 42 percent entrance rate for low-income students 4 years after completion of a bachelor's degree (Equity Indicator 7d(vi)).
 - **High-Impact Outcomes, But Funding Allows for Serving Small Proportion of Eligible Students.** Although TRIO programs have been found to be highly effective, unfortunately, funding levels only allow for serving a small portion of the individuals eligible for the programs in any given year. Coverage estimates range from 3-4 percent of eligible students for the less intensive programs to less than 1 percent for the most intensive TRIO programs (Equity Indicator 7b(iii)).

To view the full *Indicators Report*, visit the [Equity Indicators Website](#)

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