

INDICATORS

OF HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY IN THE UNITED STATES



2026

HISTORICAL TREND

REPORT

Executive Summary



The Pell Institute

For the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

pellinstitute.org

The purpose of the Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States is to gather historical statistics on expanding opportunity in the United States and to document where challenges remain. We seek to understand how to create a higher education system that provides opportunities for all while respecting the diversity of talents and gifts among us.

The full report and the dashboard associated with the report can be viewed on the Pell Institute's website: www.pellinstitute.org/equity-indicators.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2026 edition of the *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States* marks the tenth iteration of this report. As in the nine previous editions, its purpose is to gather historical statistics on expanding opportunity in the United States and to document where challenges remain. We seek to understand how to create a higher education system that provides opportunities for all while respecting the diversity of talents and gifts among us.

The key concept guiding this report is “equity.” As described in the *Setting the Stage* chapter, equity is about fairness. Equity differs from *equality*, which is defined as the distribution of the same resources and opportunities to everyone. The goal of equality is to ensure that schooling, economic success, and opportunity are “equal” for all students (de los Santos et al., 2020). Equity, on the other hand, strategically distributes resources to create a fairer system (de los Santos et al., 2020). The federal Pell Grant illustrates this distinction. If Pell Grants were distributed equally, that is, to all students, regardless of their financial need, then wealthy students would receive the same benefit as low-income students. While this is equal treatment, it fails to meet the primary objective of the Pell Grant, which is to expand higher education access for lower-income students at rates comparable to higher-income students.

This report and the ensuing indicators show three basic findings:

1. Over the past century, the United States has made great progress in expanding opportunities to students by raising higher education participation and attainment rates to historic levels.
2. These achievements have not been shared equally across the population. Gaps in participation and attainment remain, or even widened, across income, first-generation status, and race/ethnicity.
3. Recent history shows that progress in the United States has slowed or stalled, while other countries have surpassed the United States in attainment. Barriers to progress include rising higher education costs and grant aid that fails to keep pace with costs.

A summary of the findings follows:

Indicator 1 • WHO ENROLLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

The four indicators presented in this chapter reveal persistent gaps in college access by income, race/ethnicity, and parental education. While some evidence suggests that gaps have decreased since the 1970s, meaningful and significant differences in access to a college education remain. There was a 32 percentage-point gap in college enrollment between dependent 18- to 24-year-olds in the highest and lowest income quartiles in 2023. When omitting those who did not graduate from high school, the gap was 28% for high school graduates. By race/ethnicity, high school continuation rates ranged from 51% to 55% in the lowest quartile for Black, Hispanic, and White students, compared to 76% to 82% in the highest quartile. Indicator 2 will examine the types of higher education institutions that students attend.

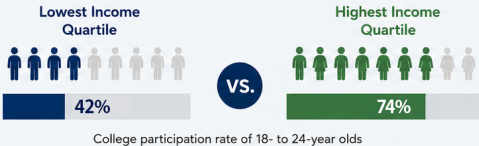
Who enrolls in higher education?

Progress in access to higher education has been uneven and limited. Significant gaps remain in college access by income, race and ethnicity, and parental education:



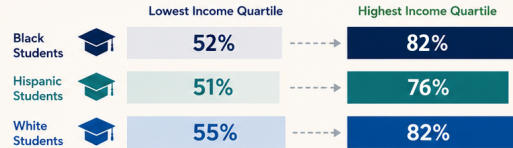
32%

The income gap between the highest and lowest income quartiles in the college participation rate of 18- to 24-year olds.



51%–55%

The range in the percentage of Black, Hispanic, and White Students in the **lowest income quartile** that went to college, compared to 76% to 82% in the highest quartile.



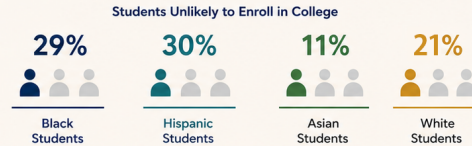
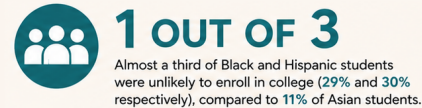
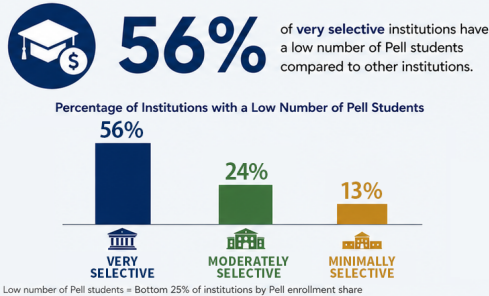
Closing these gaps is essential to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to access, complete, and benefit from higher education.

Indicator 2 • WHAT TYPES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS DO STUDENTS ATTEND?

The seven indicators presented in this chapter reveal gaps across several measures. The data consistently indicate that access to desirable or selective institutions is highly correlated with income or socioeconomic status, with lower-income students less likely to attend college or are more likely to enroll in open-admissions institutions or those with low selectivity compared with their higher-income peers. Gaps were also observed for specific racial and ethnic groups. Indicator 3 will examine the extent to which cost may be a barrier for students to access or complete college.

What types of higher education institutions do students attend?

The stratification of higher education and institutional competitiveness reinforces access gaps. The most selective institutions enroll the lowest percentage of low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. These gaps have not changed over time:



Access to the most selective institutions remains out of reach for many students of color and low-income students.

Indicator 3 • IS COST A BARRIER TO HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS AND COMPLETION?

This chapter provides evidence that higher education costs are a barrier to entry for most students, especially for the lowest-income families. College prices have risen since 1980, and the Pell Grant has not kept pace with college costs. This chapter also provides evidence that the highest-income students increasingly receive more in grants and discounts than is necessary to cover their educational costs, and that the government and institutions are subsidizing these students at a time when the income of this group has been increasing faster than that of other income groups. In contrast, unmet financial need has increased for students in the three lowest income quartiles. These trends show that financial aid resources are not directed to the neediest students, reinforcing inequality. The next section examines how students address these barriers when paying for college.

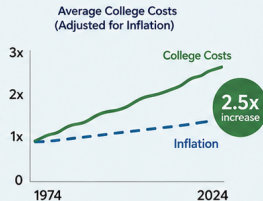
Is cost a barrier to higher education access and completion?

Higher education costs are increasing faster than inflation, and the Pell Grant's purchasing power is not keeping up. As a result, unmet need from the lowest income families is increasing while high income families are being subsidized above what they need to go to college:



**2.5
TIMES**

The increase in average college costs between 1974 and 2024, after adjusting for inflation



\$20,000

The unmet need of low-income students



\$38,000

The surplus for high-income students



VS.

in 2020



Rising costs and inadequate aid deepen inequities and stand in the way of opportunity. **Strengthening the Pell Grant is key to closing the gap.**

Indicator 4 • HOW DO STUDENTS PAY FOR COLLEGE?

The indicators presented in this chapter examine whether the cost of higher education cost is a barrier to attaining a bachelor's degree. Overall, the data show higher levels of debt and a larger number of students taking on debt. Students in the lowest income quartile are more likely to have the highest need and the highest net price. Higher-income families pay the lowest net price and benefit disproportionately from their wealth. The next chapter examines higher education attainment and workforce outcomes.

How do students pay for college?

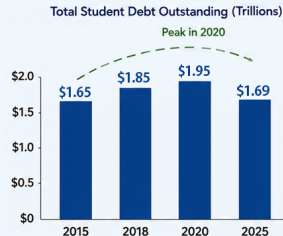
Higher education costs are increasing faster than inflation, and the Pell Grant's purchasing power is not keeping up. Students and families have been paying a growing share of college costs since 1975. Net prices have risen for all income groups, but low-income families have a higher share of the cost burden:



42.8
MILLION
BORROWERS

held **\$1.7 TRILLION** in student debt in 2025, down slightly from peaking in 2020.

Totals may not sum due to rounding.



Share of Net Price Relative to Family Income

Low-Income
(1st Income Quartile)

111%

of family income

vs.

Highest-Income
(4th Income Quartile)

14%

of family income



Student debt remains high, and low-income students must contribute a **much larger share of their resources** to afford college.

Indicator 5 • DO HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT RATES AND OUTCOMES VARY BY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS?

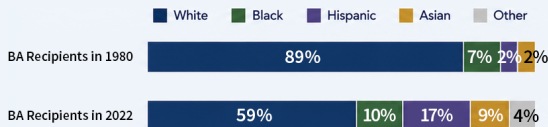
The Indicators presented in this chapter demonstrate that higher education attainment and workforce outcomes in the United States differ by family income, race and ethnicity, sex, and first-generation status. As a whole, these indicators suggest that while higher education continues to function as a mechanism for upward mobility, it does so unevenly across student groups. For example, educational attainment has risen over time across all income groups, and low-income students who do graduate earn more than high school graduates who did not attend college. However, low-income students have slightly lower incomes after earning a bachelor's degree than graduates from high-income families. Next, we examine higher education opportunity around the world.

Do higher education attainment rates and outcomes vary by student characteristics?

Racial and ethnic disparities in degree attainment have narrowed but not disappeared. Women earn the majority of bachelor's degrees, reflecting a historic reversal:



The racial and ethnic composition of degree recipients in 2022 more closely reflects the U.S. population than in 1980.



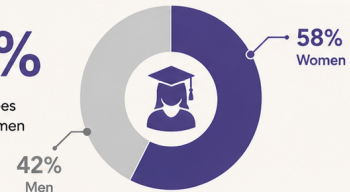
Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



58% of bachelor's degrees in 2024 were conferred to women.

58%

Bachelor's degrees conferred to women in 2024



Continued efforts are needed to close racial and ethnic gaps and to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Indicator 6 • HOW DO EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT RATES IN THE U.S. COMPARE WITH RATES IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

While the United States continues to make steady gains in college attainment, its international peers in the OECD have expanded access and increased credential completion more rapidly among the younger population of 25- to 34-year-olds. While more than half (52%) of all 25- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. have attained a tertiary degree, our rank has decreased to close to the OECD average on most measures of educational attainment. Notwithstanding cultural differences among countries, efforts should be taken to understand the success of high-performing countries, and policies should be established to strengthen pathways to completion, especially for first-generation students. These efforts will improve both national competitiveness and equity, especially in the international job market.

How do educational attainment rates in the U.S. compare with rates in other countries?

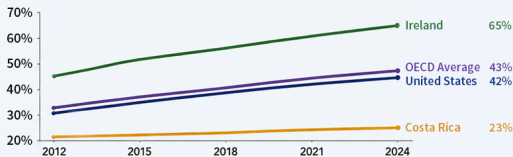
Across all countries, the proportion of tertiary degree holders with a bachelor's degree has been increasing.

Across all metrics, the United States' relative standing in degree attainment has declined over time.



The proportion of tertiary degree holders with a bachelor's degree is increasing

Percent of tertiary degree holders with a bachelor's degree



Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2024



First-generation students earned a tertiary degree at lower rates in the United States

Parents with an upper-secondary award (equivalent to a U.S. high school diploma)



Percent of first-generation students that earned a tertiary degree (2022)



International comparisons highlight the need for continued investment in U.S. higher education to remain **globally competitive and equitable**.

Indicator 7 • ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS, ATTAINMENT, AND COST BY STATE?

The indicators presented in this chapter show that educational opportunity is highly dependent on the state in which a student lives. There is high variation in college participation rates, college costs, state grant aid, and attainment rates across all states in all indicators. The differences can be profound. The college participation rate, for example, ranges from 7% to 40%. Enrollment rates for younger adults 18- to 24-years old can range from 19% to 52%. Average college costs can range from \$17 thousand to \$33 thousand for public institutions and \$20 thousand to \$78 thousand for private institutions. State need-based aid can range from nearly nothing up to 126% of the value of the Pell Grant. Any long-lasting policy interventions designed to close opportunity gaps need to take into account state policy.

Are there differences in higher education access, attainment, and cost by state?

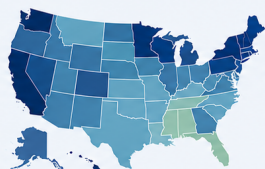
Higher education opportunity varies widely by state. Some states outperform international measures in attainment, while most underperform. Costs also vary widely:



Bachelor's degree attainment varies widely by state in 2025.

25%
to
70%

Range of bachelor's degree attainment by state in 2025



Bachelor's Degree Attainment (2025)

- 60% or higher
- 50% – 59%
- 40% – 49%
- 30% – 39%
- Less than 30%



In 1940, the range of bachelor's degree attainment by state was 2% to 7%, excluding the District of Columbia.

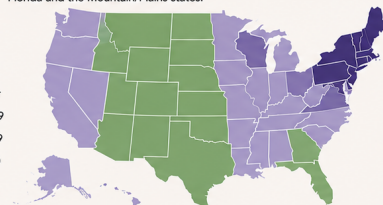


College is the most expensive in the Northeast.

The lowest prices are found in Florida and the Mountain/Plains states.

Average Annual College Cost (2024–25)

- \$25,000 or higher
- \$20,000 – \$24,999
- \$15,000 – \$19,999
- Less than \$15,000



Where students live should not determine the **quality or affordability** of the higher education opportunities they receive.

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE)

conducts and disseminates research and policy analysis to encourage policymakers, educators, and the public to support college access and success for low-income and first-generation students through unimpeachable research and statistics. The Pell Institute shares the Council's mission to advance and defend the ideal of equal opportunity in postsecondary education. As such, the Council's focus is to ensure that the least advantaged segments of the American population have a realistic chance to enter and graduate from a college or university with a bachelor's degree.

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