



# INDICATORS OF HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY IN THE UNITED STATES

## 2026 HISTORICAL TREND REPORT



The Pell Institute  
For the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

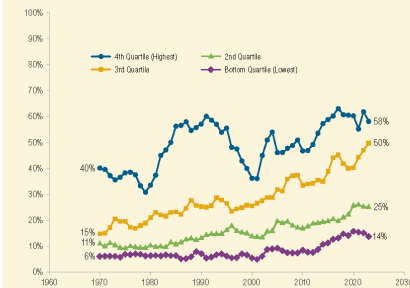
# INDICATORS

OF HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY  
IN THE UNITED STATES



2026  
HISTORICAL TREND  
REPORT

Indicator 5a(i) - Estimated bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 for dependent family members in the U.S. population, by family income quartile: 1970-2023



The State of Higher Education Opportunity:  
Examining Differences Between Equity and Equality



The Pell Institute  
For the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

pellinstitute.org



## WEBINAR PARTICIPATION

Please use the **chat box** to let us know your title, affiliation, and where you are joining from.

Please use the **Q&A box** for questions throughout the presentation. Only questions in the Q&A will be addressed.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- ***Dr. Margaret Cahalan*** (former Director of the Pell Institute and current Senior Research Fellow) and ***Dr. Laura Perna*** (University of Pennsylvania), who helped create and maintain the Indicators series of reports.
- ***Tom Mortenson*** (Senior Research Fellow), founder of the Postsecondary OPPORTUNITY Newsletter, whose data archive was the source of many measures in the report.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The reviewers, sponsors, and staff support for the report:
  - ***Kimberly Jones*** (President of COE),
  - ***Aaron Brown*** (Executive Vice President of COE),
  - ***Dr. Arnold Mitchem*** (President Emeritus),
  - ***Maureen Hoyler*** (Past President and Senior Advisor of COE)
  - ***Terrance Hamm*** (Vice President of Communications and Marketing),
  - ***Esosa Ruffin*** (Reviewer, Publishing Support, & Logistics),
  - ***Holly Hexter*** (Technical Support and Editing),
  - ***Trauvello Stevenson*** (Digital Media Manager).



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Authors of previous reports:
  - *Marisha Addison*
  - *Stephanie Breen*
  - *Khadish Franklin*
  - *Alysia Genao*
  - *Nathan Jiang*
  - *Erick Montenegro*
  - *Chelsea Murray*
  - *Terry Vaughan III*
  - *Pooja R. Patel*
  - *Esosa Ruffin*
  - *Roman Ruiz*
  - *Sureima Santillan*
  - *Jeremy Wright-Kim*
  - *Mika Yamashita*



## OVERALL FINDINGS

1. The United States **has made great progress** in expanding opportunities to students over the past century.
2. Access to and benefits from higher education **are not shared equally** across the population.
3. Progress to provide higher education opportunity in the United States has **slowed or stalled**, while other countries have surpassed the United States in attainment.





## FINDING #1:

The United States has made great progress in expanding opportunities to students over the past century.



The national U.S. bachelor's degree attainment rate for those aged 25 years and older has increased from 24% to 38% since 1996.

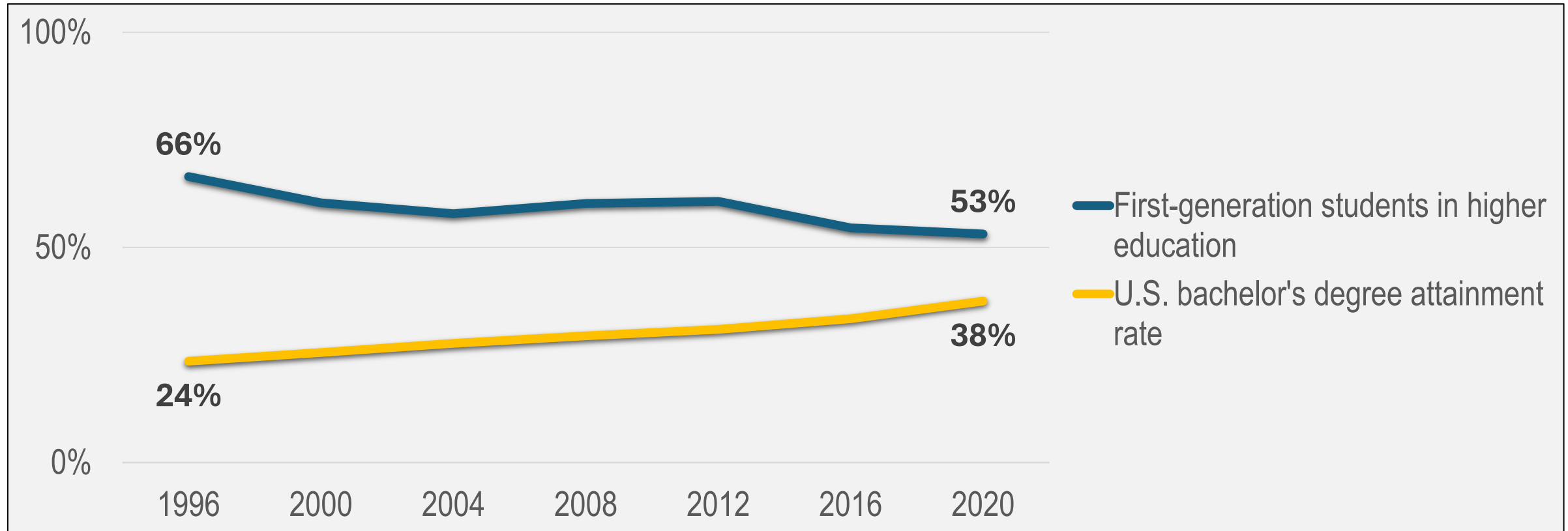


Figure S.7: Percentage of first-generation degree-seeking students and the U.S. bachelor's attainment rate for adults 25 years and older: 1996-2020

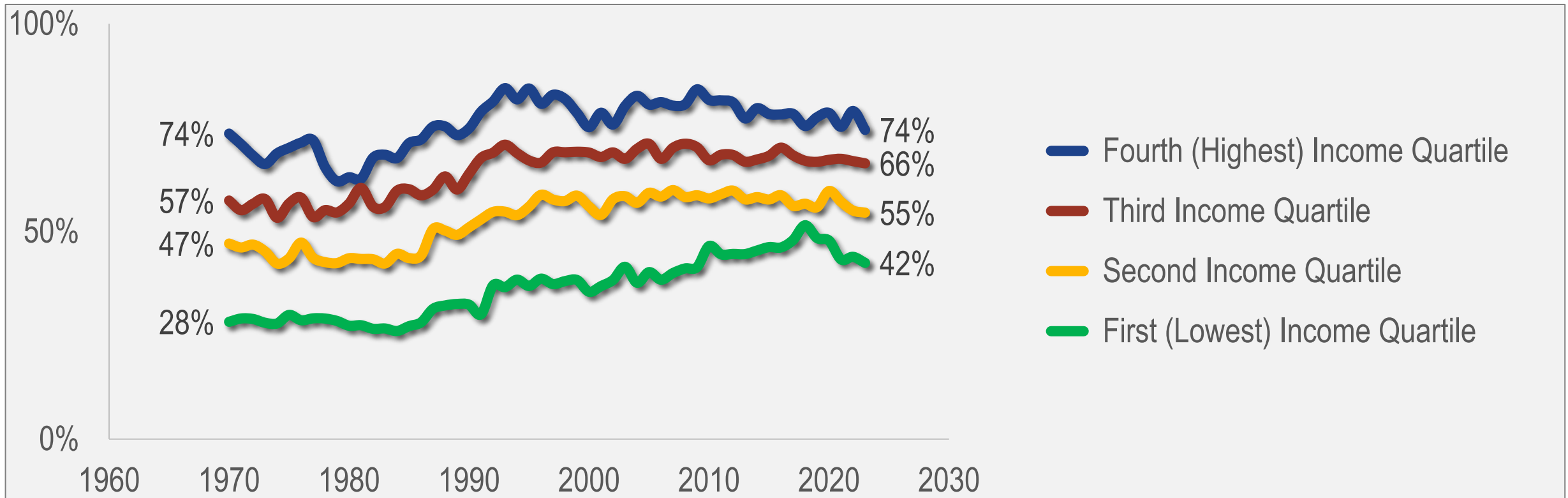


## FINDING #2:

Access to and benefits from higher education are not shared equally across the population.



**COLLEGE ACCESS:** The gap in college participation rates between the highest- and lowest-income quartiles decreased from 1970 to 2023, but it still persists.

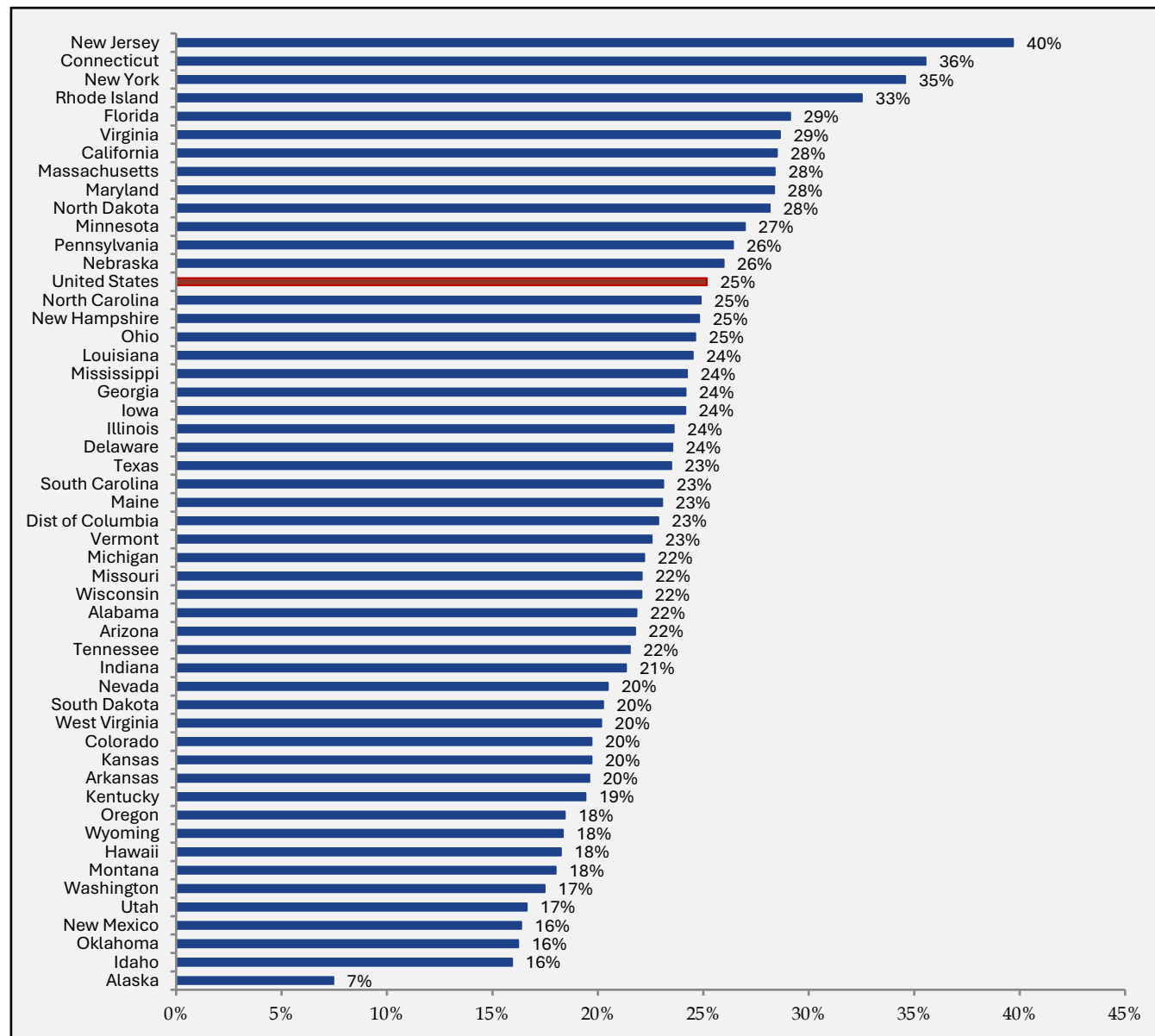


Indicator 1a: College participation rate: Percentage of 18- to 24-year-old dependents in the general population by family income quartile: 1970-2023



College participation rates for low-income students vary widely across states. Low-income students have better opportunities for higher education in some states and less in others.

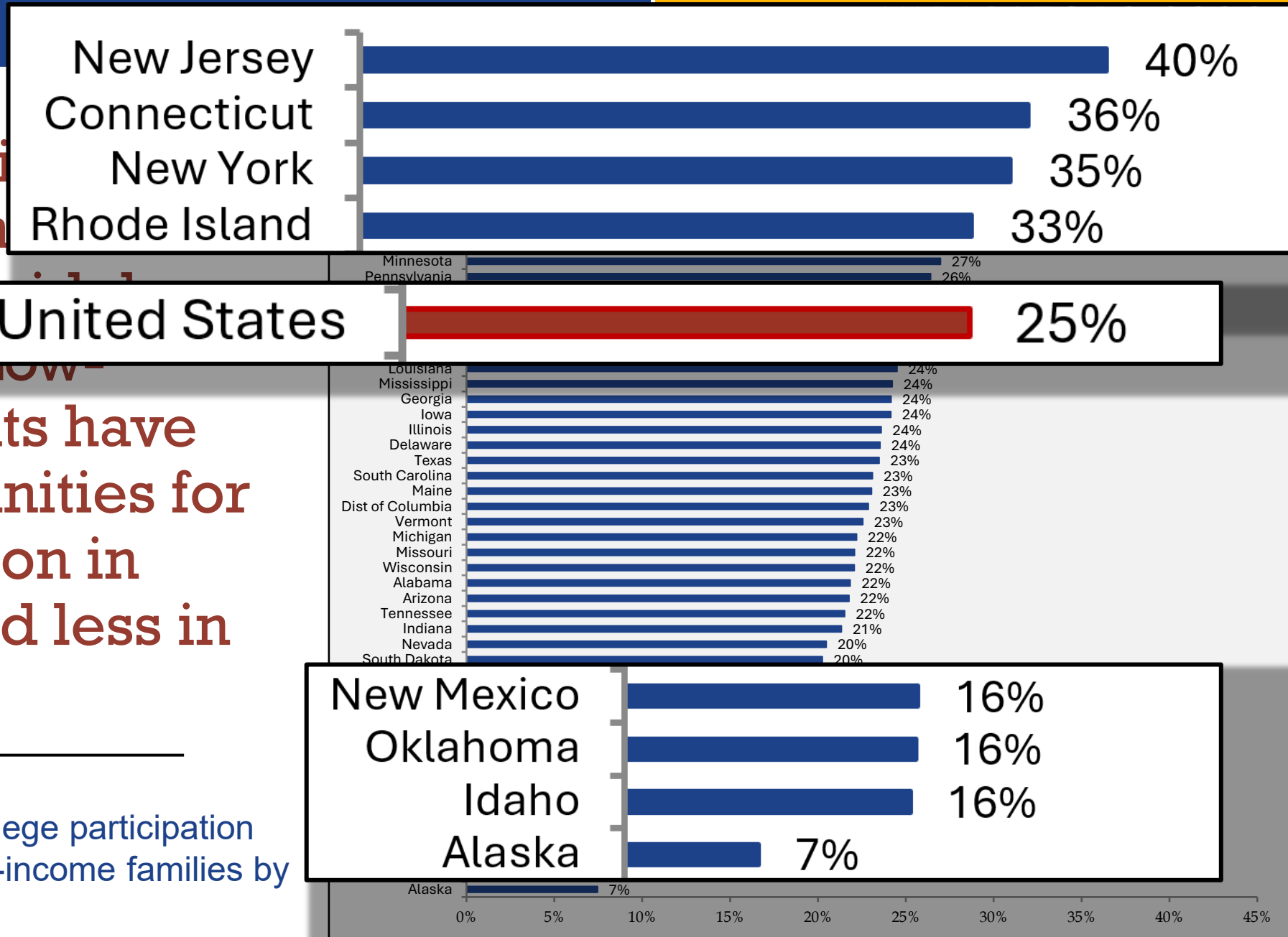
Indicator 7a: Estimated college participation rates for students from low-income families by state: 2023





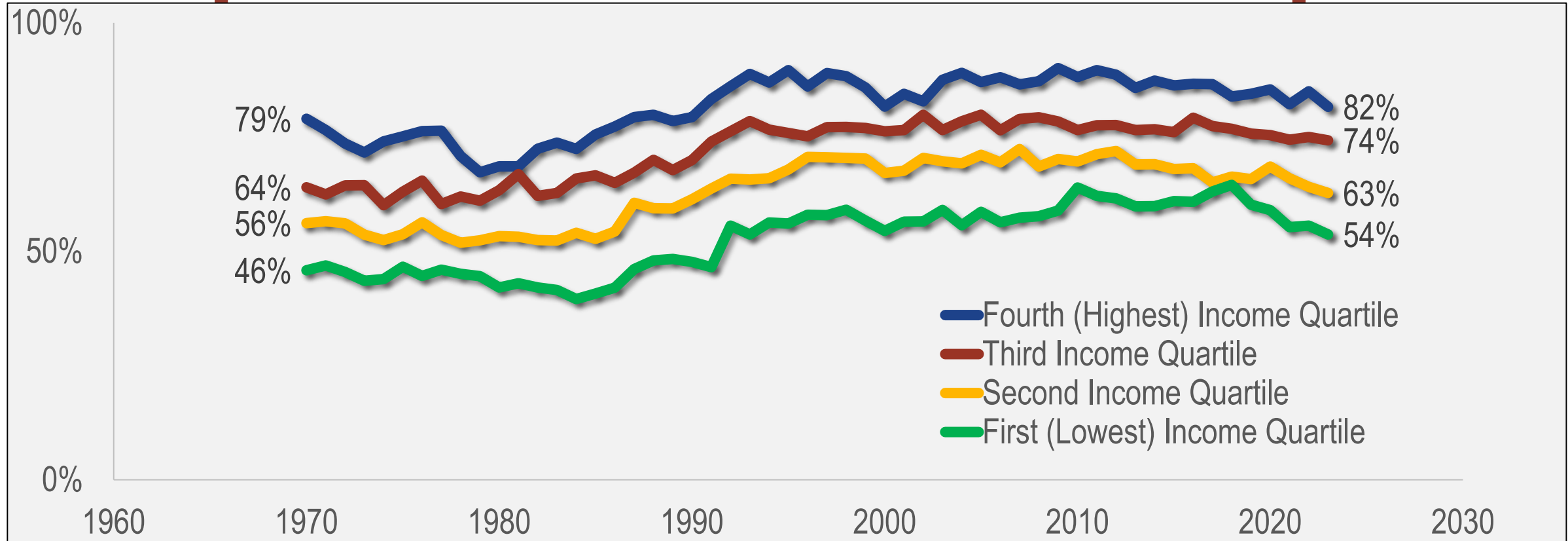
College participation rates for low-income students vary across states. Low-income students have better opportunities for higher education in some states and less in others.

Indicator 7a: Estimated college participation rates for students from low-income families by state: 2023





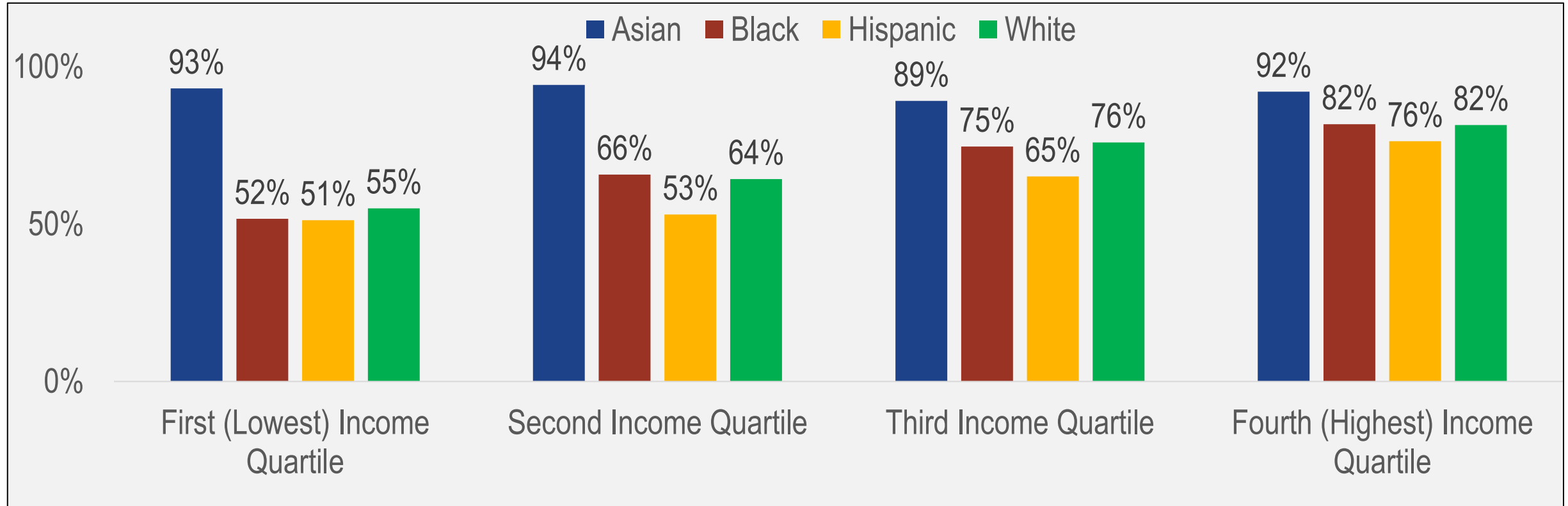
**COLLEGE ACCESS:** Similarly, the gap in the college continuation rate among high school graduates between the highest- and lowest-income quartiles decreased from 1970 to 2023, but it still persists.



Indicator 1b: High school graduate college continuation rate: Percentage of high school graduates who continue to college, by family income quartile: 1970-2023



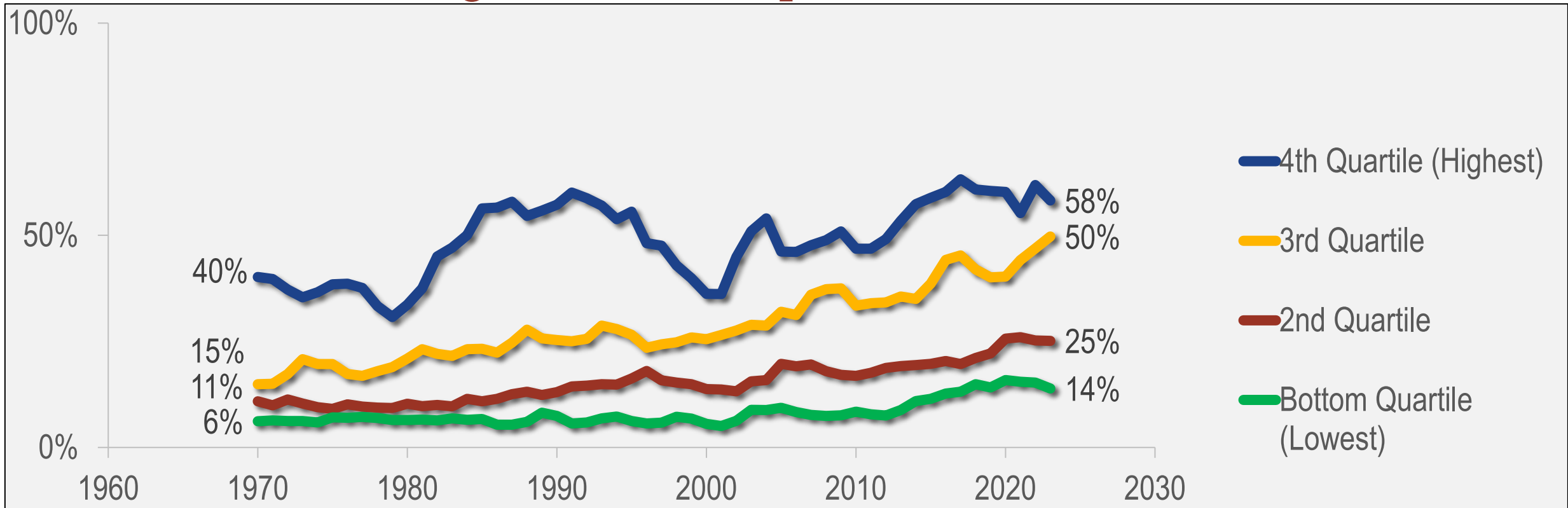
## COLLEGE ACCESS: Both race/ethnicity and income are correlated with high school graduate college continuation rates.



Indicator 1d(ii): High school graduate college continuation rate: Percentage of high school graduates who continue to college, by race/ethnicity and family income quartiles: 2023



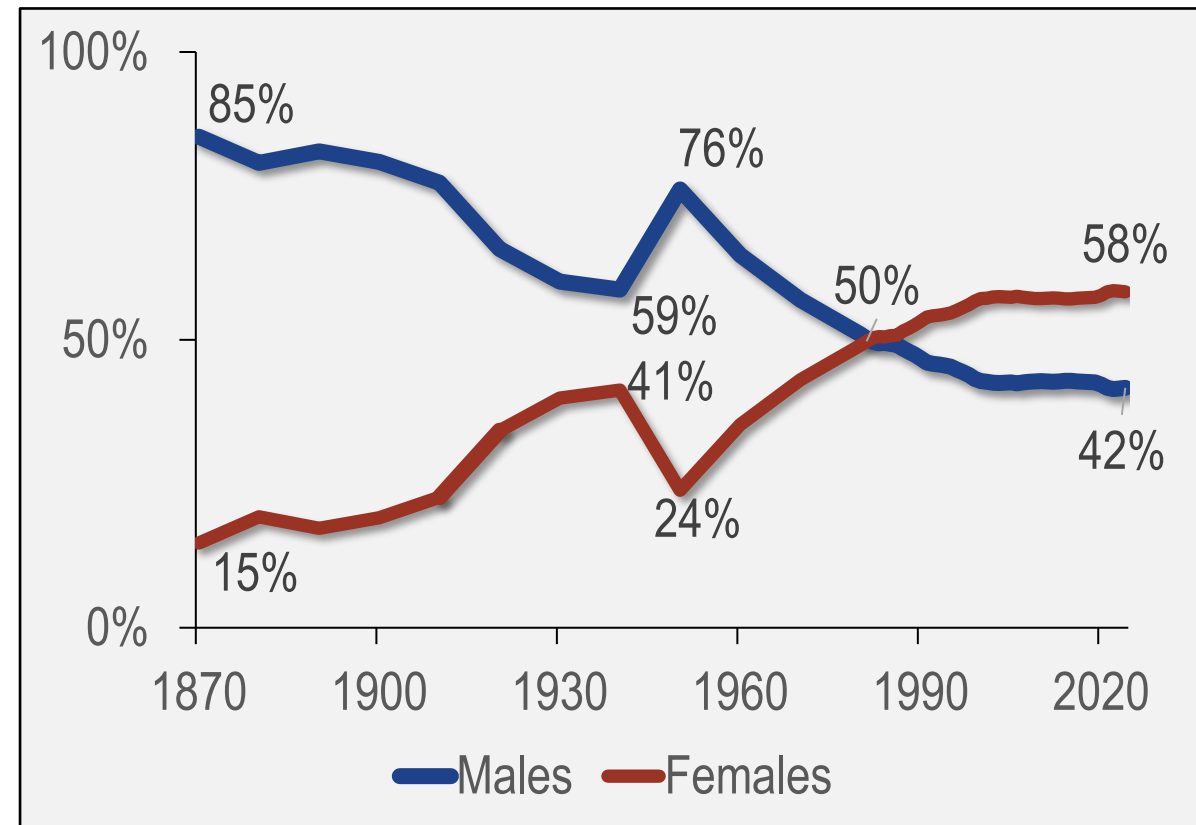
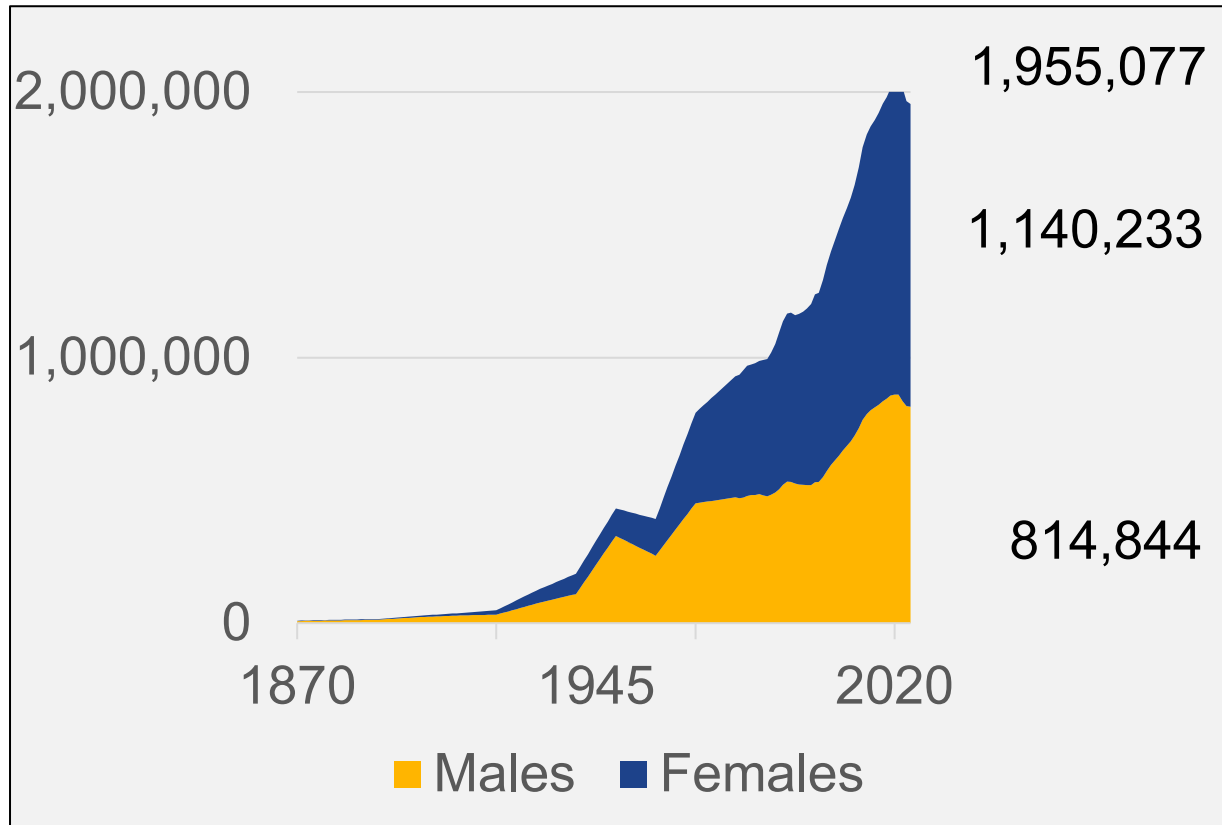
# ATTAINMENT: Bachelor's degree attainment rates increased across all family income quartiles over time, but have not closed between the lowest and highest income quartiles.



Indicator 5a(i): Estimated bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 for dependent family members in the U.S. population, by family income quartile: 1970-2023



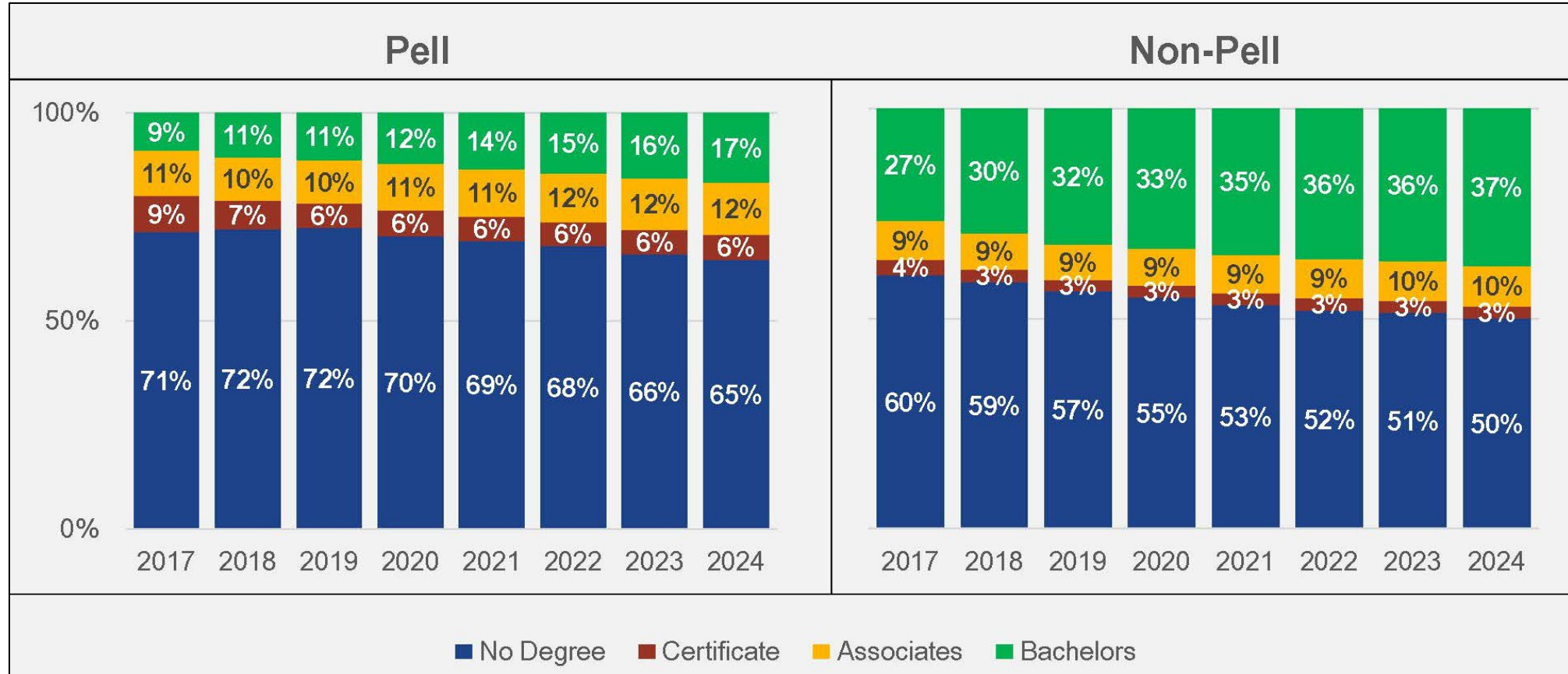
# ATTAINMENT: Female degree earners now make up the majority of bachelor's degree earners.



Indicator 5a(iii): Number and percentage of bachelor's degrees conferred by sex: 1870-2024



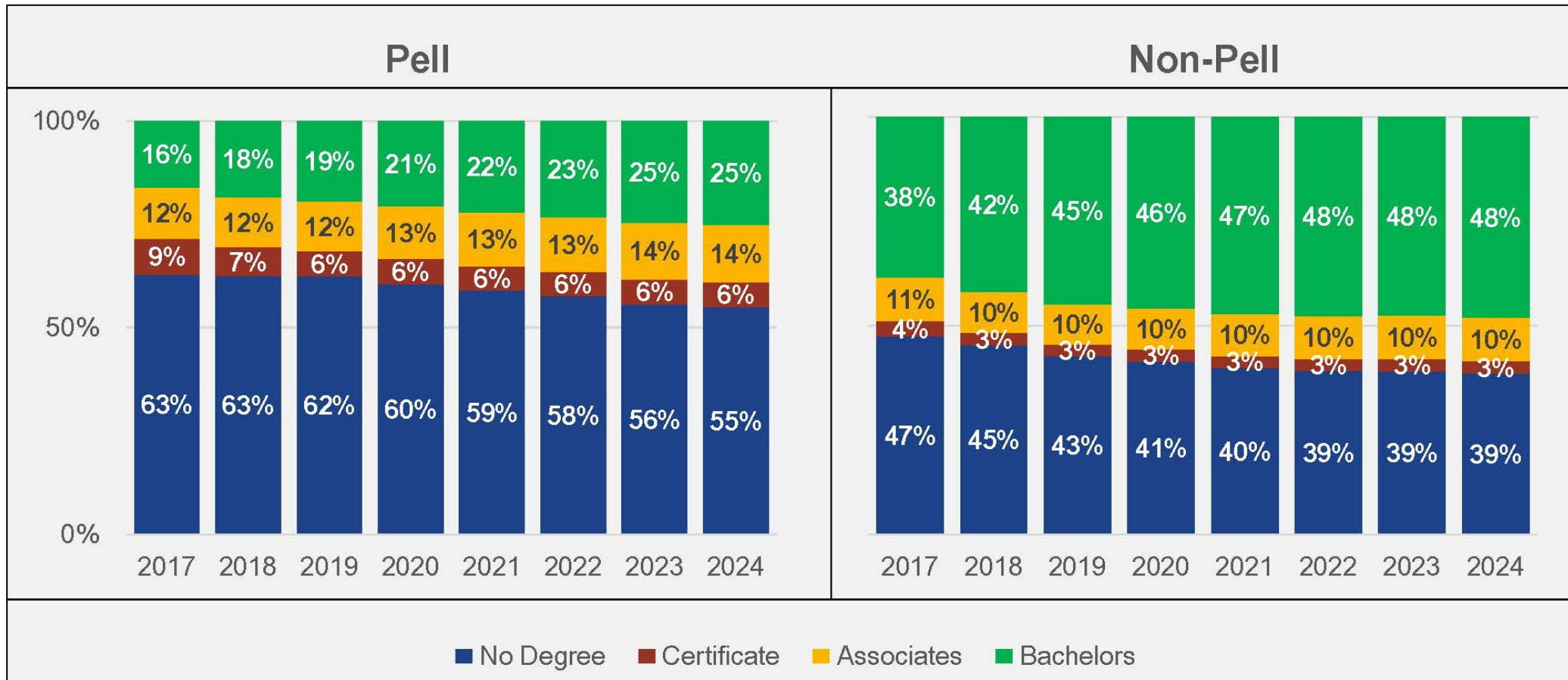
**ATTAINMENT:** Four-year graduation rates have increased for all students since 2017, but the gap between Pell Grant and non-Pell recipients has not changed.



Indicator 5c(vi) Percentage distribution of certificates and degrees awarded for first-time, full-time students in four and six years, by Pell-Grant status in the student's first year: 2017-2024



**ATTAINMENT:** Six-year graduation rates have increased for all students since 2017, but the gap between Pell Grant and non-Pell recipients has not changed.

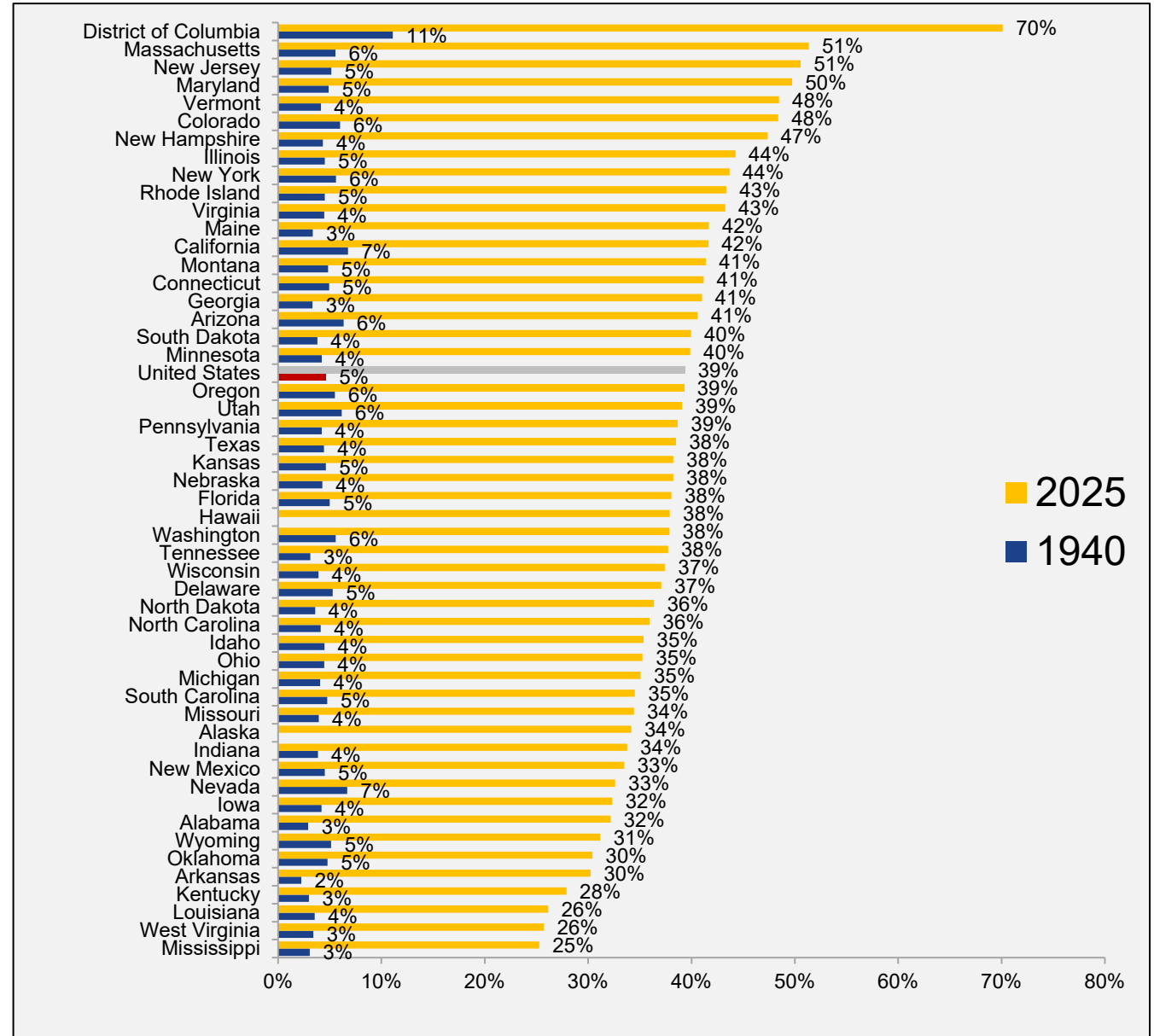


Indicator 5c(vi) Percentage distribution of certificates and degrees awarded for first-time, full-time students in four and six years, by Pell-Grant status in the student's first year: 2017-2024



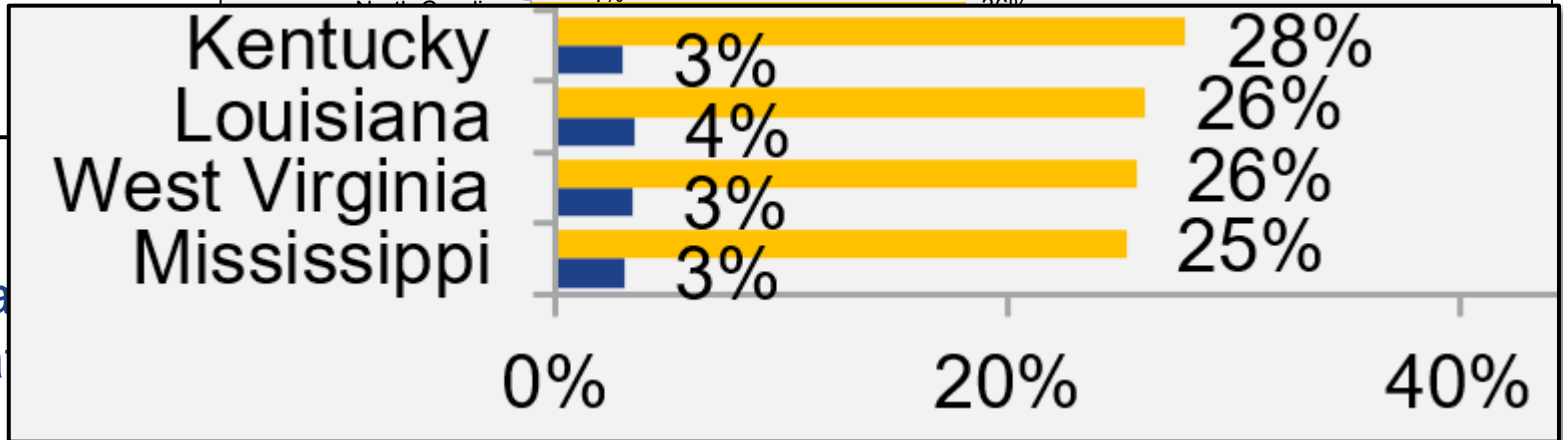
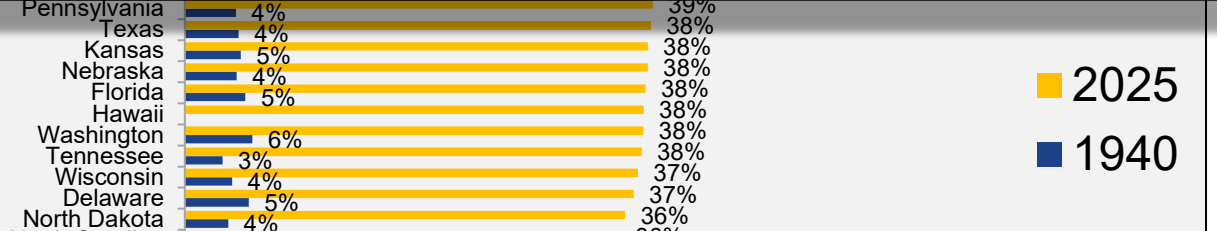
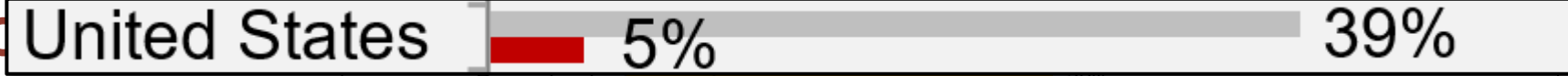
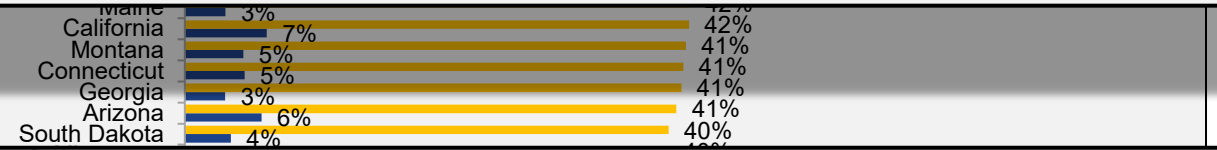
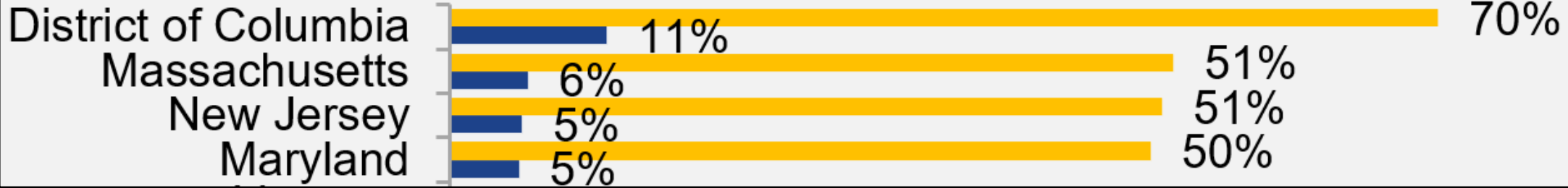
**ATTAINMENT:**  
Bachelor's degree attainment has increased over time, but growth rates across states are inconsistent.

Indicator 7g(ii): Percentage of the population age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher by state: 1940 and 2025





ATTAINMENT HAS  
Bachelor's  
attainment has  
increased over time, but  
growth rates across  
states are inconsistent.

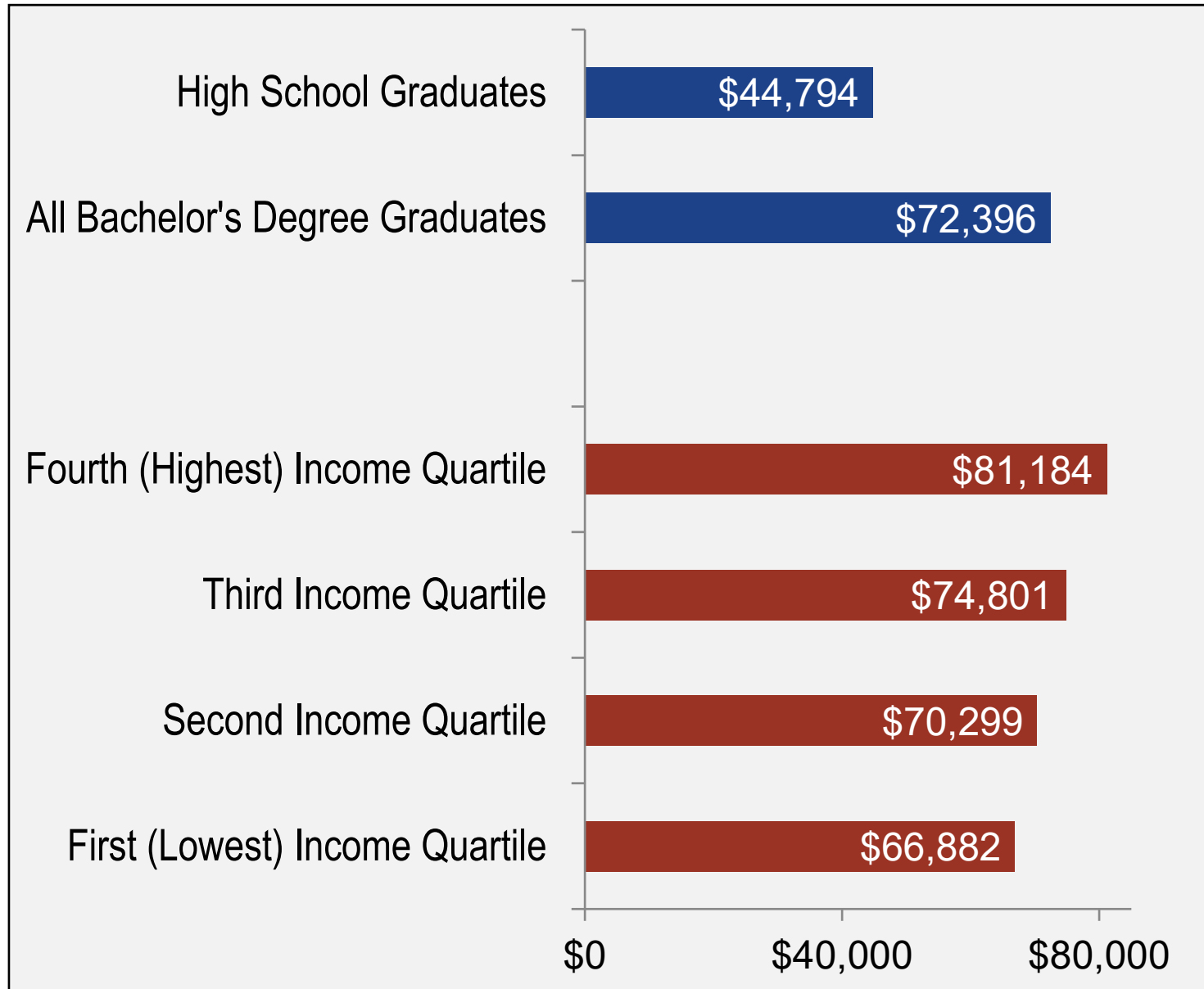


Indicator 7g(ii): Percentage of the population age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher by state, 1940 and 2025



## INCOME: Bachelor's degree graduates in the lowest-income quartile at college entry earned more than high school graduates who did not attend college.

Indicator 5f(iii): Average annualized income for dependent students who received bachelor's degrees in 2016 in 2020 by parents' income quartile, compared with full-time, year-round high school graduate workers 25 to 34 years old (in 2024 constant dollars)



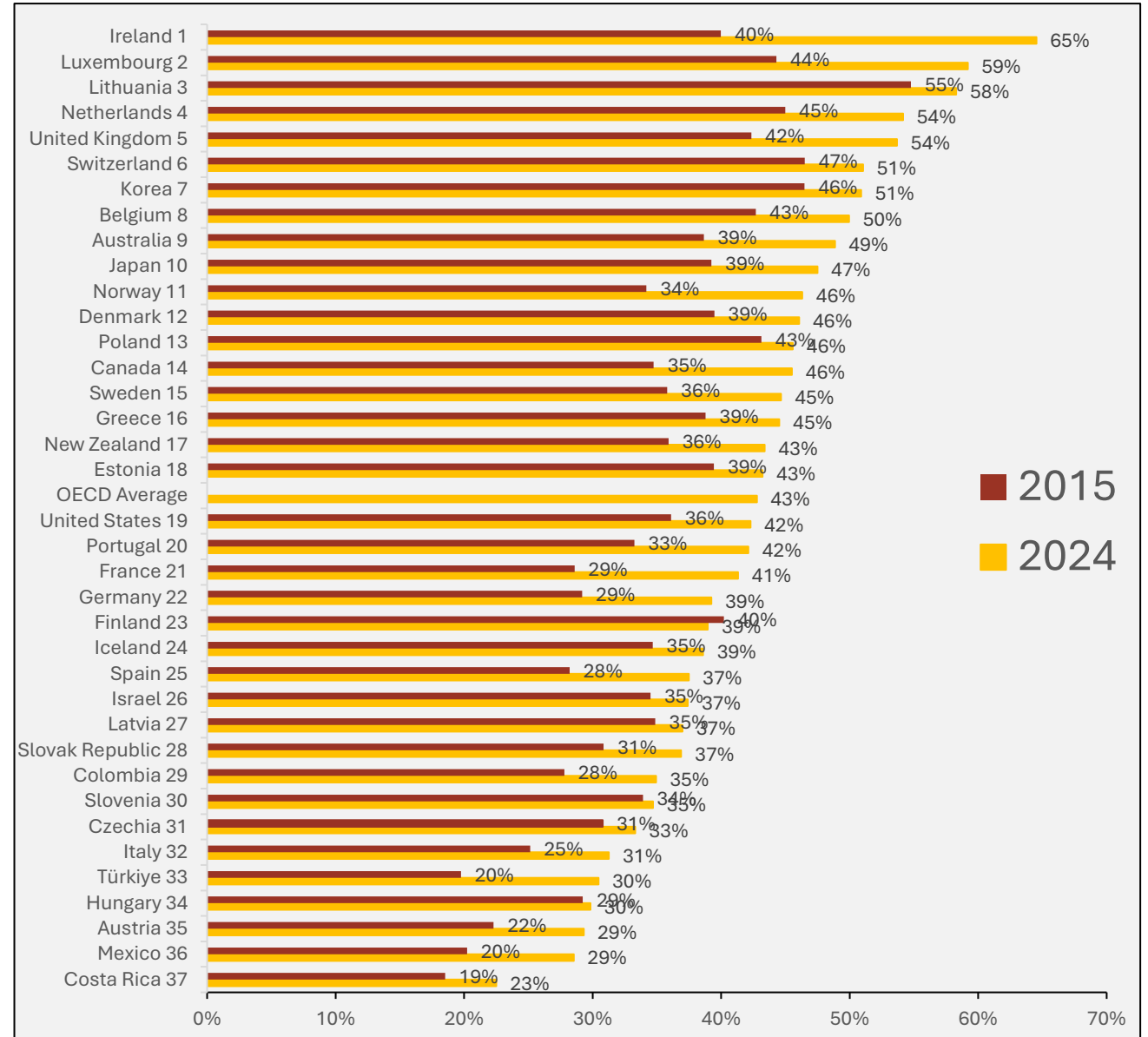


## FINDING #3:

Progress to provide higher education opportunity in the United States has slowed or stalled, while other countries have surpassed the United States in attainment.



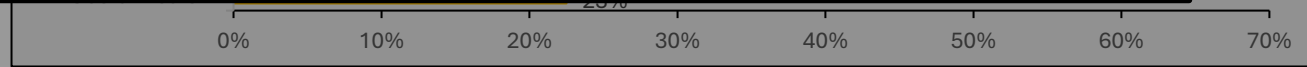
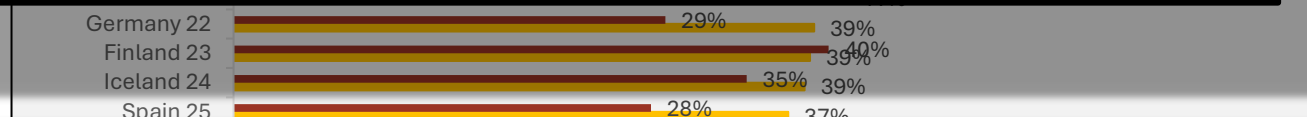
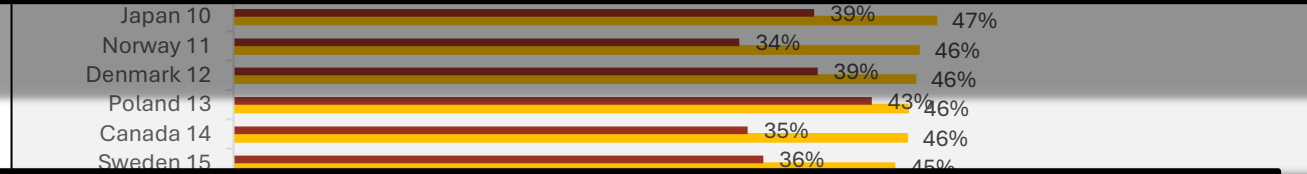
Many countries are outpacing the United States in the growth of bachelor's degree attainment.



Indicator 6a: Percentage of adults aged 25 to 34 with a type A (equivalent of bachelor's degree or above) tertiary degree, by country: 2015 and 2024



Many countries are outpacing the United States in the growth of bachelor's degree attainment

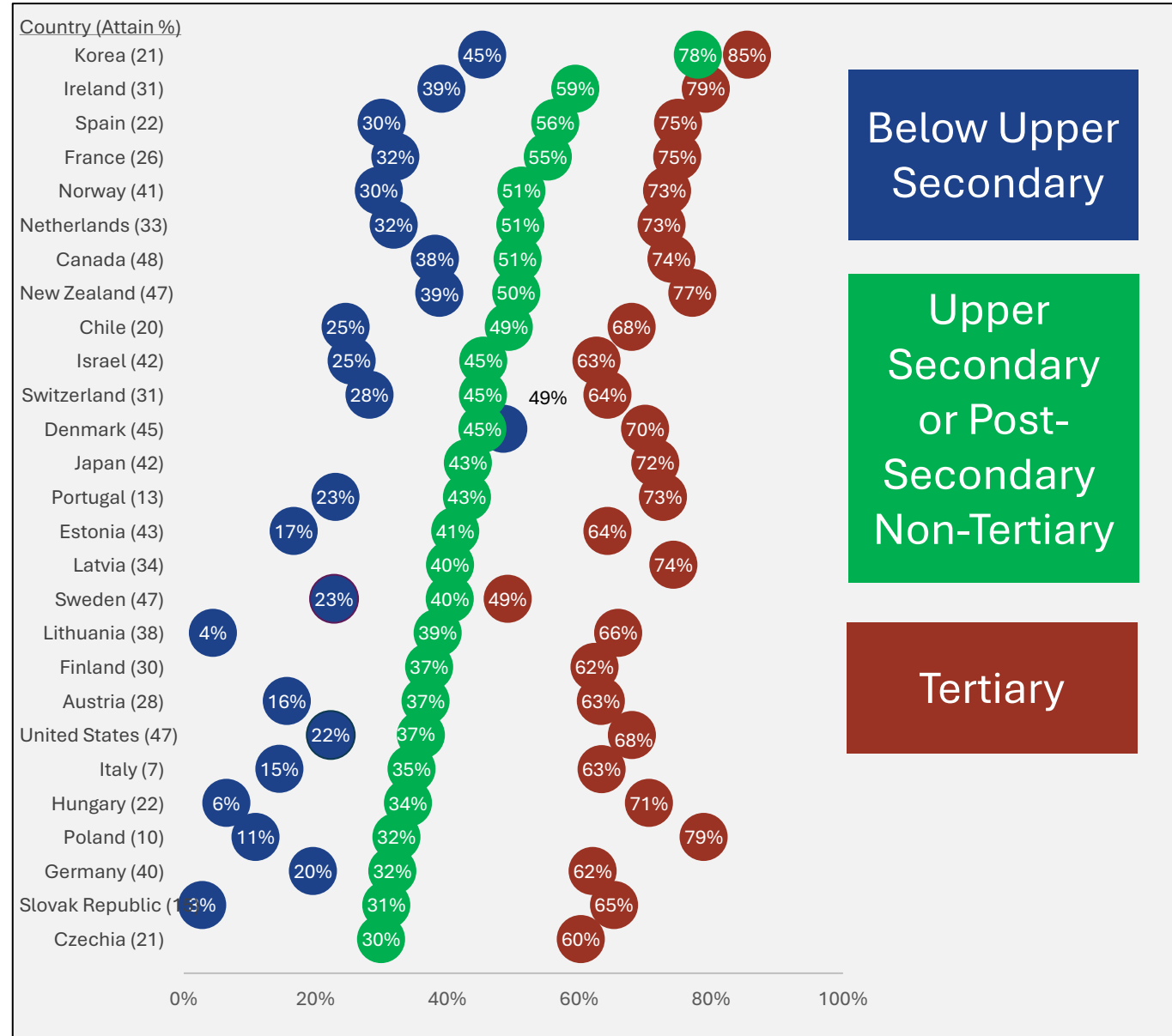


Indicator 6a: Percentage of 25 to 34 with a typical bachelor's degree attainment, by country: 2015 and 2024



Other countries have surpassed the United States in degree attainment for first-generation students.

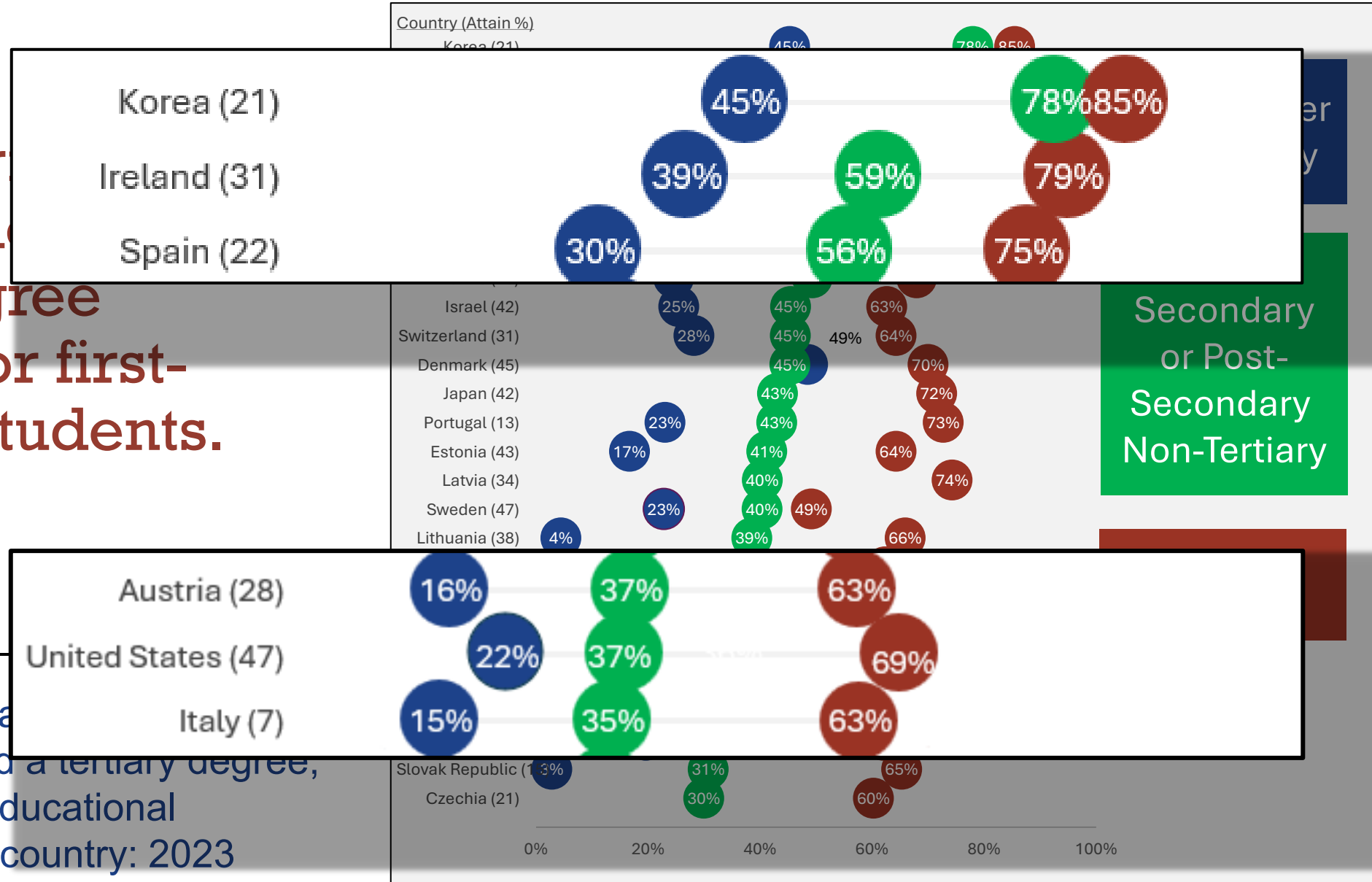
Indicator 6c: Percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who earned a tertiary degree, by parents' highest educational attainment level and country: 2023





Other countries surpassed the United States in degree attainment for first-generation students.

Indicator 6c: Percentage of 25-year-olds who earned a tertiary degree, by parents' highest educational attainment level and country: 2023





## CONTACT INFORMATION

For detailed questions about the findings or the methods, email [pellstaff@pellinstitute.org](mailto:pellstaff@pellinstitute.org).

### ***Sean Simone, Ph.D.***


Vice President of Research and Director of the Pell Institute  
[sean.simone@pellinstitute.org](mailto:sean.simone@pellinstitute.org)

### ***Nicole Brunt***

Research Associate  
[nicole.brunt@pellinstitute.org](mailto:nicole.brunt@pellinstitute.org)



# DASHBOARD DEMONSTRATION



The Pell Institute  
For the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

[About Pell](#)
[Publications and Products](#)
[Tools and Datasets](#)
[Events](#)
[Media Inquiries](#)

## STS 14a. Median lifetime earnings by educational attainment level, 2019 (in constant 2024 dollars)

**SETTING THE STAGE**

---

**INDICATOR 1: ENROLLMENT**

---

**INDICATOR 2: INSTITUTION TYPES**

---

**INDICATOR 3: COLLEGE COST**

---

**INDICATOR 4: STUDENT DEBT**

---

**INDICATOR 5: COMPLETION & OUTCOMES**

---

**INDICATOR 6: INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS**

---

**INDICATOR 7: STATE COMPARISONS**

---

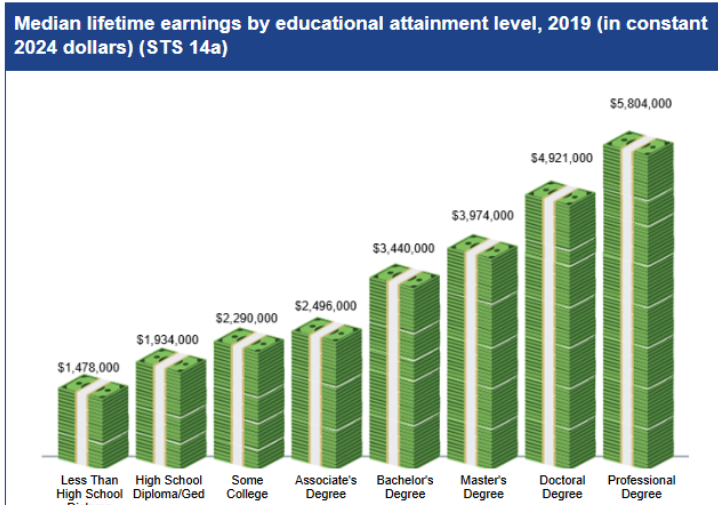
**FULL REPORT**

---

**WHAT ARE THE LIFETIME EARNINGS IN THE U.S. POPULATION BY EDUCATION ATTAINMENT LEVEL?**

The higher the degree attainment, the higher the lifetime earnings. This earnings premium is greater than cost of the education to attain a bachelor's degree.

**Median lifetime earnings by educational attainment level, 2019 (in constant 2024 dollars) (STS 14a)**



Educational Attainment Level	Median Lifetime Earnings (in constant 2024 dollars)
Less Than High School Diploma	\$1,478,000
High School Diploma/Ged	\$1,934,000
Some College	\$2,290,000
Associate's Degree	\$2,496,000
Bachelor's Degree	\$3,440,000
Master's Degree	\$3,974,000
Doctoral Degree	\$4,921,000
Professional Degree	\$5,804,000



## DASHBOARD DEMONSTRATION

- [Figure S.3](#): Percentage of working-age adults from 18 to 65 years old who participate in social safety net benefit programs, by educational attainment: 2022
- [Indicator 2a](#): Percentage distribution of full-time, first-time degree-seeking undergraduate students who did and did not receive Pell or other federal grants by level of institution attended
- [Indicator 3c\(i\)](#): Unmet financial need of dependent full-time undergraduates attending one institution for a full year, by family income quartile
- [Indicator 6c](#): Percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who earned a tertiary degree, by parents' highest educational attainment level and country