WHO IS TODAY’S STUDENT?
THE NEW MAJORITY: PART-TIME STUDENTS, FULL-TIME PROVIDERS

When thinking of typical college students, most of us envision 18- to-21-year-olds fresh out of high school taking classes full-time on a sprawling campus. That is no longer true: full-time, 18- to 21-year-old students now make up just a third of the college population. Today’s students represent a new reality.

They are older: Thirty-eight percent of today’s undergraduate students are older than 25, with students in poverty less likely than their higher income peers to enroll right out of college. They’re also are balancing multiple commitments. About 40 percent of community-college students work 20 or more hours per week. Some 25 percent of students are raising children. And 40 percent of today’s students attend school part-time – often squeezing in classes between other obligations on urban campuses convenient to their jobs or at their kitchen tables.

MORE RACIALLY DIVERSE – AND FACING GREATER FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Today’s students are increasingly diverse: racially and socioeconomically. Enrollment among Hispanic students tripled over the last 15 years, and Black student enrollment grew by 72 percent. That trend is projected to continue through 2021, with Black enrollment growing by 25 percent, Hispanic enrollment increasing by 42 percent, and White enrollment growing by just 4 percent.

Today’s students are more socioeconomically diverse, too. Almost half of today’s students are on their own financially, and must juggle multiple expenses: the ballooning cost of college, rent, transportation, groceries and other basic living costs for themselves and in some cases for kids. Oftentimes, they’re also struggling to make ends meet. Close to 42 percent of today’s first-year students live near or below poverty.
If today’s students fail to complete their higher education, it’s less likely they will get a job that pays livable wages or reach their full potential. Especially since the majority of jobs – 65 percent – will require postsecondary education of some form by 2020. Not earning an associate degree will cost a high school graduate half a million dollars in earnings, and not earning a bachelor’s degree will cost $1 million. This also has a major impact on our national well-being. Businesses can’t thrive without a pool of qualified workers to fill open positions. Neither can our economy.

The good news is this: policy has the power to change the equation. Updating federal policy could help address factors at the root of challenges faced by today’s students – such as finances, hours worked and family – and help boost all students’ success. Needed changes include improving data collection, rethinking financial aid, and creating flexibility in federal policy so colleges and universities can innovative to meet today’s students’ needs. Visit luminafoundation.org/todays-student for more information.

To view all sources for data used in this document, please visit www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student-citations.
Today’s college majority is different than it used to be—older, busier, more diverse and more financially strained. And too often today’s students struggle under the burden of many stressors and too little support. While some colleges and universities have adapted their models to better serve today’s students, federal policy has failed to keep pace and is no longer meeting the needs of the majority of college students. It’s imperative that we adjust our practices and policies so that all students are equipped to succeed.

This is important to ensure every student has the chance to reach his innate potential and live a productive, fulfilling life. It’s also critical for our nation’s economy and future.

We can change the outcomes for today’s students. Learn how:

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