

# Progress Interrupted

Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions Prior to the End of Race-Conscious Affirmative Action



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**Source:** Jeff Strohl, Emma Nyhof, and Catherine Morris. *Progress Interrupted: Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions Prior to the End of Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024. [cew.georgetown.edu/progressinterrupted](http://cew.georgetown.edu/progressinterrupted)



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# Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the individuals and organizations whose generous support has made this report possible: Lumina Foundation (Jamie Merisotis and Courtney Brown) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Patrick Methvin and Jamey Rorison). We are honored to be their partners in our shared mission of promoting postsecondary access, completion, and career success for all Americans.

We would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to Anthony P. Carnevale, the founding director of Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, for his leadership and guidance in this work.

The staff of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce was instrumental in the production of this report from conception to publication. In particular, we would like to thank

- Nicole Smith and Artem Gulish for quantitative and qualitative feedback;
- Zack Mabel for data analysis;
- Martin Van Der Werf for editorial and qualitative feedback;
- Katherine Hazelrigg, Fan Zhang, Johnna Guillerman, Maryam Noor, and Abiola Fagbayi for communications efforts, including design development and public relations; and
- Coral Castro for assistance with logistics and operations.

Many others contributed their thoughts and feedback throughout the production of this report. We especially are grateful to our talented designers and editorial advisors, whose efforts were vital to its successful completion.

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, or any of their officers or employees. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors.*

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# Introduction

**I**n the wake of the Supreme Court's ban on race-conscious admissions, the pursuit of diversity and equity in higher education is increasingly under threat. While access to higher education has improved overall for historically underrepresented students, the quality of that opportunity remains uneven, particularly along the lines of race/ethnicity and class. The nation's most selective colleges still enroll disproportionately large shares of white and Asian American/Pacific Islander<sup>1</sup> students and high-income students, exacerbating disparities with less-selective institutions that serve much larger shares of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and lower-income students.

Race-conscious affirmative action brought about a modicum of racial and ethnic diversity to selective colleges, and by extension to our social and economic institutions. Yet this still failed to sufficiently increase representation at selective institutions to reflect the growing percentage of underrepresented minority students who are of college age. In many ways, the existence of race-conscious affirmative action functioned as a bandage on an open wound, allowing society to believe in the polite fiction that selective institutions were making steady, albeit incremental, progress toward greater parity. Now, society has come full circle and the absence of race-conscious affirmative action will make racial and ethnic inequality at selective institutions much more apparent.

Scrutiny of admissions processes at selective colleges is unlikely to diminish, in large part because of the prestige associated with acceptance to these institutions and the opacity surrounding the specific criteria by which students are admitted. The financial resources at selective colleges' disposal—which include substantial endowments, generous alumni networks, and other sources of revenue—generally translate to more funding for elements of the college experience that matter for student success, such as instruction and support

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<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, we created one category for Asian American and Pacific Islander students for consistency between 2009–10 and 2019–20. Native Hawaiian students are also included in this group. For more detail on this categorization and enrollment patterns for these groups, see Appendix C.

services.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, graduation rates are far higher at these colleges than their less selective and open-access counterparts. Unfortunately, access to the most selective institutions is limited by definition and by design.<sup>3</sup>

Tension around the question of who is most “deserving” of admissions to selective institutions underscores some of the more common misgivings surrounding affirmative action. A Pew Research Center poll conducted ahead of the Supreme Court’s decision suggested that half of US adults disapproved of selective colleges considering race and ethnicity in the admissions decision.<sup>4</sup> While partisan affiliation influences perceptions of affirmative action, it would be reductive to claim that it is driven entirely by it. For instance, a June 2023 YouGov poll found that a majority of Americans believe that race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions should be continued, but 70 percent believe that colleges should not be allowed to consider race in admissions.<sup>5</sup> This apparent contradiction, reflected in other polling, suggests that Americans are wary of race/ethnicity being the determining factor in college admissions over other considerations—namely, academic ability.<sup>6</sup>

The end of affirmative action will also make it harder to escape the existing perception of selective colleges as bastions of elitism, a view that leaves colleges in the crosshairs during an era of populist politics. One of the most common arguments against this view is the idea that academic merit drives admissions to the most selective colleges and universities—not elite status. However, the available evidence mutes

claims of meritocratic admissions. Equating college selectivity with merit is a myth, as we have shown in our previous work.<sup>7</sup>

### **The higher education system became more representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of the college-age population overall between 2009 and 2019, but trends differ significantly between open-access and selective institutions.**

Much has been written about how the nation’s most selective colleges will struggle to retain diversity now that the Supreme Court has struck down race-conscious affirmative action. However, a narrow focus on admissions trends at a small number of highly selective schools misses the fact that the vast majority of students are not served by these institutions. Our understanding of the demographic landscape of our postsecondary system is incomplete if we do not zoom out to include trends at open-access institutions.

This report is a retrospective analysis of the changing demographics of selective and open-access institutions from 2009 to 2019, the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Race/ethnicity could still be explicitly considered in the admissions process during that decade.<sup>8</sup> We chose to end the analysis with the onset of COVID-19 because the pandemic profoundly altered college enrollment (see box, page 30). This analysis produces several key insights. First, despite increasing enrollment at selective colleges and universities,<sup>9</sup> only 14 percent of Black/African

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2 We examine disparities in funding for instruction and support services at selective and open-access institutions in Part II of this report.

3 The most selective 92 institutions, as defined by Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index, educated just 4 percent of first-time undergraduates in 2019.

4 Pew Research Center, *More Americans Disapprove Than Approve of Colleges Considering Race, Ethnicity in Admissions Decisions*, 2023.

5 Salvanto, “CBS News Poll Finds Most Say Colleges Shouldn’t Factor Race into Admissions,” 2023.

6 AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Most Oppose Banning the Consideration of Race and Ethnicity in College and University Admissions,” 2023.

7 Carnevale et al., *The Merit Myth*, 2020.

8 Highly selective institutions, which enroll relatively few students overall, were the most likely to consider race/ethnicity in the admissions process. A majority of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American students did not attend those institutions. Reber et al., “Admissions at Most Colleges Will Be Unaffected by Supreme Court Ruling on Affirmation Action,” 2023.

9 This analysis evaluates enrollment trends among first-time students, from the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). IPEDS defines a first-time student as “a student who has no prior postsecondary education experience (except as noted below) attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. This includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. It also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer session, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits or recognized postsecondary credential earned before graduation from high school).”

American students and 16 percent of Hispanic/Latino students attended these institutions in 2019. American Indian/Alaska Native student enrollment at selective institutions declined over this time period, with only 12 percent of students enrolled at these institutions in 2019. By contrast, 45 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students and 32 percent of white students attended selective colleges in 2019.

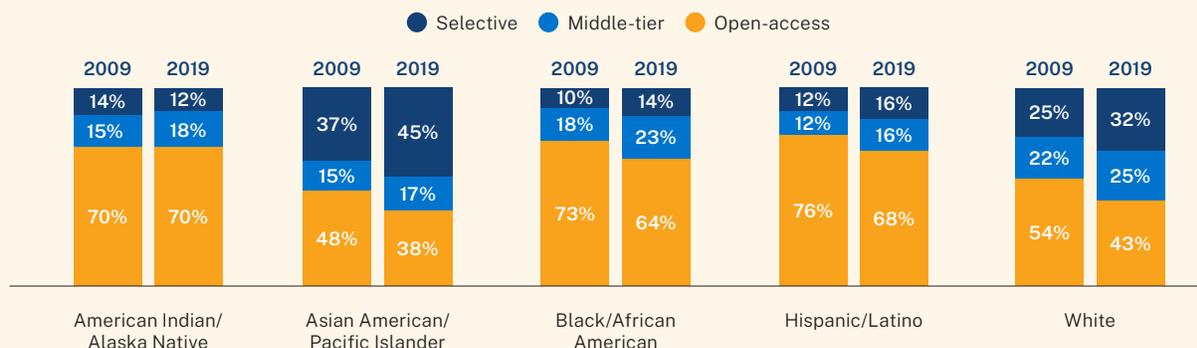
The nation’s open-access colleges, on the other hand, are still a more accurate representation of the nation’s multihued cultural fabric. In 2019 almost two-thirds of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students, along with approximately 70 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, attended an open-access college. Meanwhile, white and Asian American/Pacific Islander students exited open-access institutions.

In 2009, 54 percent of all white students and 48 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander<sup>10</sup> students attended an open-access institution. By 2019, those shares declined to 43 percent and 38 percent, respectively (Figure 1).

Overall first-time enrollment is declining, a shift that is entirely driven by decreases at open-access institutions.<sup>11</sup> The coronavirus pandemic further exacerbated declines at open-access institutions, as we will explore in a later section of this report. COVID’s impact was compounded by underlying long-term changes including declines in the college-age population; slow growth in the American labor force; and low unemployment, which makes entering the workforce a more appealing alternative than going straight into college from high school.<sup>12</sup>

FIGURE 1

About two-thirds of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students attend open-access institutions, compared to about two in five white and Asian American/Pacific Islander students.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of colleges in Barron’s selectivity index (2014). Middle-tier institutions include those in the fourth tier of Barron’s selectivity index. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron’s selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron’s and all less-than-four-year institutions.

Values may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

10 In this analysis, we created one category for Asian American and Pacific Islander students for consistency between 2009–10 and 2019–20. Native Hawaiian students are also included in this group. In 2009–10, these students were grouped together. However, in 2019–20 separate data were available for each group. For more detail on this categorization and enrollment patterns for these groups, see Appendix C.

11 Despite losing nearly a fifth of their students, open-access institutions still enrolled just over half of first-time undergraduates in 2019 while selective institutions enrolled just over one quarter.

12 Tough, “Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College,” 2023.

## How we categorized selective and open-access institutions.



This analysis relies on Barron's selectivity index to separate schools into three broad categories: selective, middle-tier, and open-access. Barron's selectivity criteria rests on colleges' acceptance rates, in addition to admitted students' class rank, GPA, and ACT or SAT scores. There were 498 colleges categorized as selective in 2019 ([Table 1](#)), defined as those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index: "most competitive," "highly competitive," and "very competitive." The most competitive group, comprising 92 institutions, accounted for 4 percent of first-time enrollees as of 2019; highly competitive institutions enrolled another 7 percent; and very competitive institutions enrolled 16 percent.

Middle-tier institutions—which are not a main focus of this report—consist of institutions labeled as "competitive." Open-access institutions are defined as those classified as "less competitive" or "non-competitive" in Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions that are not ranked by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions. For more information on this categorization see [Appendix B](#).

TABLE 1

Selective institutions accounted for 14 percent of colleges and universities in this analysis in 2019, while open-access institutions made up 69 percent.

	SELECTIVE	MIDDLE-TIER	OPEN-ACCESS	TOTAL
2009	503	638	2,976	4,117
2019	498	618	2,451	3,567

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files: 2014; and US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Middle-tier institutions include those in the fourth tier of Barron's selectivity index. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

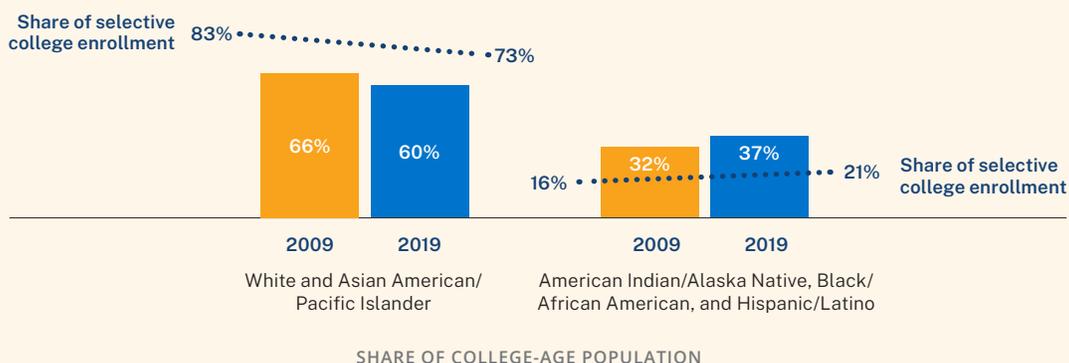
From 2009 to 2019, the enrollment landscape at selective colleges and universities saw little fundamental change. White and Asian American/Pacific Islander students continue to hold disproportionate shares of the seats at selective colleges relative to their share of the college-age population. In 2019 members of these groups made up 60 percent of the college-age population, but 73 percent of enrollments at selective institutions (Figure 2). Meanwhile, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students collectively made up 37 percent of the college-age population, but only 21 percent of selective

college enrollments. For both groups, over- and underrepresentation looks similar to what it was in 2009.

**WHITE AND ASIAN AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS CONTINUE TO HOLD DISPROPORTIONATE SHARES OF THE SEATS AT SELECTIVE COLLEGES RELATIVE TO THEIR SHARE OF THE COLLEGE-AGE POPULATION.**

**FIGURE 2**

**American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students remain underrepresented in selective college enrollment relative to their share of the college-age population.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014; and US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 2009 and 2019.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron’s selectivity index (2014).

## The American higher education system remains stratified by class.

Not only is the American higher education system segregated by race, it is also segregated by class. In this report, we evaluate enrollment trends among students who received Pell Grants as our proxy for family income. While the share of Pell Grant recipients now attending selective institutions has increased by 6 percentage points, a majority are still enrolled at open-access institutions. Sixty percent of Pell Grant recipients attend open-access institutions, while less than 20 percent attend selective colleges and universities (Figure 3). Meanwhile, 40 percent of students who do not receive Pell Grants are enrolled at selective institutions, and just over one in three attend open-access colleges and universities.

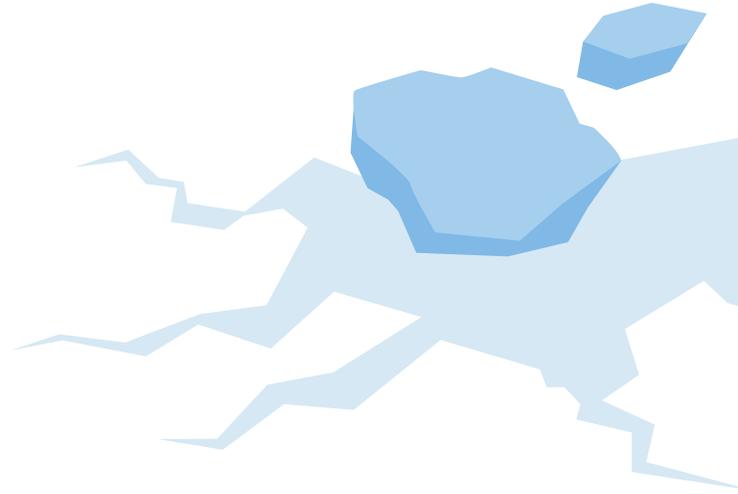
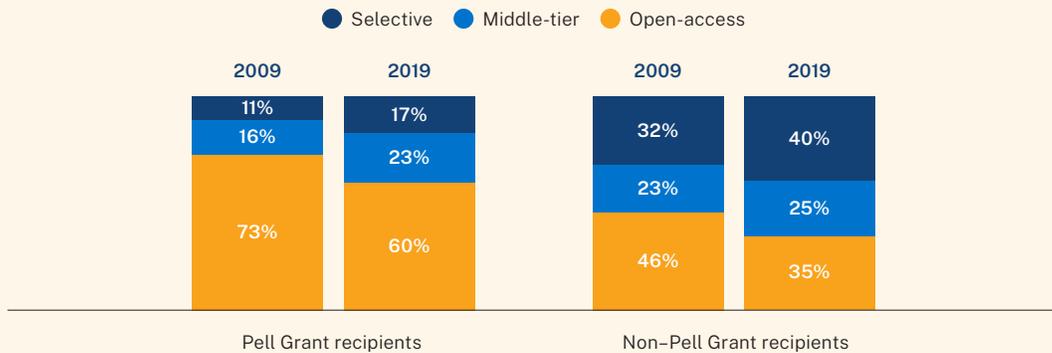


FIGURE 3

The share of Pell Grant recipients attending selective institutions has grown, but the majority of Pell Grant recipients are enrolled at open-access institutions.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of student finance data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time, full-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Middle-tier institutions include those in the fourth tier of Barron's selectivity index. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

Values may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

## The demographic makeup of selective institutions is slightly more representative by race/ethnicity than it is by class.



Representation by race/ethnicity and by income matters, both separately and in combination. Analyses throughout the rest of this report, however, do not examine the interactions between race, ethnicity, and class, primarily because we use Pell Grant reciprocity as our proxy for class—data on the racial and ethnic makeup of Pell Grant recipients are not available for the academic years we cover in this report. However, we know that American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino populations are disproportionately represented among lower-income communities. Furthermore, the racial wealth gap continues to widen, with a difference of \$240,120 in wealth between the median Black/African American and white household.<sup>13</sup>

This raises the question: Are selective institutions doing a better job of recruiting and enrolling lower-income students, or are they doing a better job of enrolling students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds? Relatedly, to what extent is there overlap between these two characteristics? To shed some light on this, we first evaluated the extent to which enrollment distributions by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) at selective institutions would need to change in order for those groups to match the racial/ethnic and SES distribution of the graduating high school class.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis indicates that the collective representation of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AI/AN/NH/PI), Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students at selective colleges is slightly higher than the representation of students from low socioeconomic status<sup>15</sup> backgrounds. If current student enrollments were redistributed to achieve parity with the graduating high school class, redistributing students by race and ethnicity would translate to a 19-percentage-point shift in enrollment share from students in overrepresented groups (Asian/Asian American, multiracial,

13 Perry et al., “Black Wealth Is Increasing, but So Is the Racial Wealth Gap,” 2024.

14 The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which is used for all other analyses in this report, does not have data that disaggregate a measure of class, like Pell Grant reciprocity, by race/ethnicity. Examining the intersection of race/ethnicity and class in enrollment patterns requires the use of another data set, the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09). We use the 2013–14 academic year because this corresponds to when on-time high school graduates in the HSL:09 study would have first enrolled if they seamlessly transitioned into college.

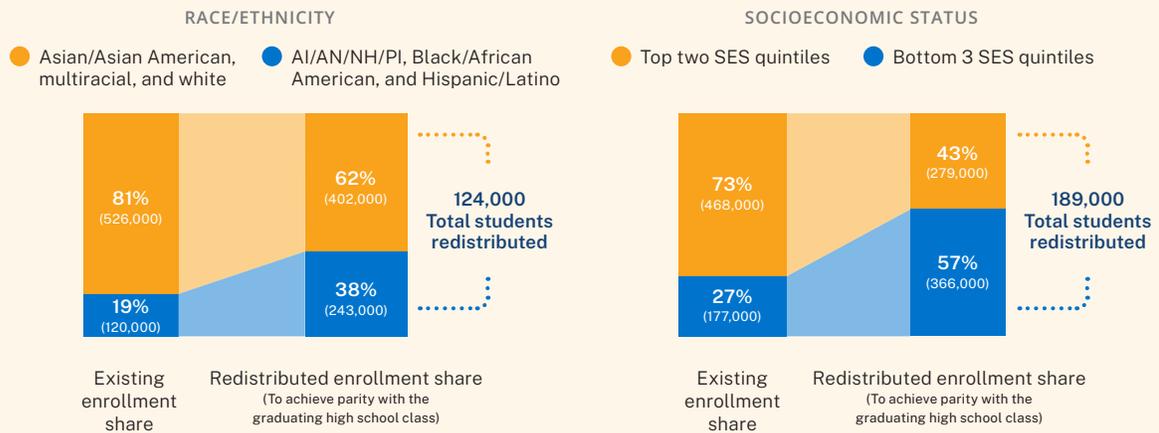
15 We use a continuous measure of family socioeconomic status (SES) to define class that is included in the restricted use data file from the US Department of Education, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09). SES captures important environmental differences that shape access to educational opportunity that are not captured by income alone. Family SES is determined by considering household income, parents’ educational attainment, and parents’ occupational prestige (a measure of social standing, power, and earnings ability).

and white) in favor of students from underrepresented groups (AI/AN/NH/PI, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino), or about 124,000 students. By contrast, the share of high-SES enrollment would need to fall to an even greater degree—almost 30 percentage points (or 189,000 students)—to align SES representation at selective colleges with that of the high school graduating class (Figure 4).

However, this does not address questions about the overlap between race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Further investigation finds that students from high-SES backgrounds are better represented at selective colleges and universities than their low-SES counterparts across all racial and ethnic groups,<sup>16</sup> although the degree of representation varies. For example, while high-SES Black/African American students are better represented at selective colleges than their low-SES counterparts, they still remain underrepresented relative to their share of the graduating high school class.

**FIGURE 4**

**For enrollment at selective colleges to match the racial/ethnic and class distribution of the graduating high school class, the share of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous students would need to increase by 19 percentage points, while the share of lower-SES students would need to increase by 30 percentage points.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09), restricted use data; and the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

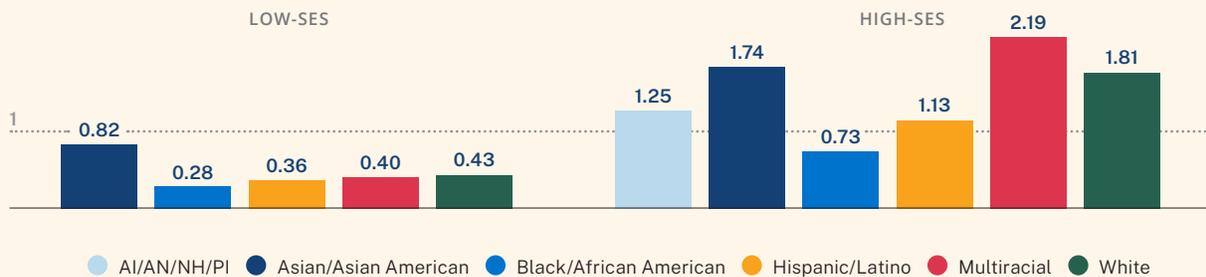
Note: IPEDS data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic year. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron’s selectivity index (2014). AI = American Indian; AN = Alaska Native; NH = Native Hawaiian; and PI = Pacific Islander.

Hispanic/Latino students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds are slightly overrepresented at selective colleges, but to a much lesser extent than their white, Asian/Asian American, and multiracial high-SES peers (Figure 5).<sup>17</sup>

Some have proposed that selective colleges turn to class-based affirmative action in response to the *Students for Fair Admission (SFFA)* ruling.<sup>18</sup> While this has the potential to improve representation of low-income students overall on selective college campuses, class-based affirmative action policies would be unlikely to improve representation of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AI/AN/NH/PI), Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students in the absence of additional interventions. Achieving a student body that mirrors that of the broader population would require not only the consideration of both race/ethnicity and class in the admissions process, but a completely different approach to selective admissions overall.<sup>19</sup>

FIGURE 5

**Black/African American students from families with high socioeconomic status are underrepresented at selective colleges, while similar students from all other racial/ethnic groups are overrepresented at these colleges.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09), restricted use data, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014; and the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013-14.

Note: The IPEDS data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic year. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014). Results are generated using survey weights that account for the sampling design of the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 and sample attrition in follow-up survey rounds. We use the median of the continuous SES distribution to distinguish between low-SES and high-SES students. The sample size of low-SES AI/AN/NH/PI students at selective schools is too small to evaluate their overall representation. AI = American Indian; AN = Alaska Native; NH = Native Hawaiian; and PI = Pacific Islander.

17 This analysis groups American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students together. In the rest of the report, Pacific Islander students are grouped with Asian American students to be consistent with 2009-10 categorizations. The sample size of low-SES AI/AN/NH/PI students at selective schools is too small to evaluate their overall representation. For more detail on this analysis, see Appendix C.

18 Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023; Kahlenberg, "The Affirmative Action That Colleges Really Need," 2022; Meyer, "The End of Race-Conscious Admissions," 2023.

19 Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023; Levine and Reber, *Can Colleges Afford Class-Based Affirmative Action?*, 2023.

## Enrollment patterns at selective and open-access institutions matter because of their disparate outcomes.

Enrollment trends matter because outcomes matter. A tiny number of selective colleges are launchpads to positions of power and influence, but these institutions serve a minute fraction of the total undergraduate population. Open-access institutions educate the vast majority of college students, but, unfortunately, do so with the fewest resources and have the lowest success rates. The American postsecondary system, in other words, tends to provide the highest-quality education to those who need it least: students who are primarily wealthier than the median and who attended well-resourced high schools that smooth the transition into the most-selective colleges.<sup>20</sup> The unfortunate consequence is that higher education is doing exactly the opposite of what it is meant to do in a truly meritocratic society. It does not serve as an engine of opportunity for the students who need it most. Instead, it cements into place our tiered—and ultimately inequitable—K-12 education system that has failed disproportionately large numbers of low-income, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students.

Opponents of race-conscious admissions policies might argue that considerations of academic merit ought to trump all. However, these arguments overlook the academic undermatching that often occurs in the selective college admissions process. Prior research found that less than one in five Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students who score above average on the SAT attends a selective college. Meanwhile, close to one in three white students with similar SAT scores attends a selective college.<sup>21</sup> Admissions processes, which previously allowed for consideration of race and ethnicity, still allow for recruiting students who have

lower grade point averages and SAT scores but have other attributes that may be prized in admissions, such as athletic ability, artistic talent, or a legacy connection to the institution.

A system that channels lower-income and underrepresented minoritized students away from better-resourced selective colleges perpetuates further inequalities later in life. Selective institutions have more to invest in their students' success, primarily in spending on instruction, student services, and academic support. Students at open-access institutions do not have the same access to this level of resources.<sup>22</sup> The negative repercussions are evident in disparate graduation rates. Less than half of students at open-access institutions complete their degree, compared to almost 80 percent of those at selective colleges. Prior research indicates that this gap in graduation rates holds even among students with high SAT scores.<sup>23</sup>

Disparities in graduation rates contribute to further disparities in future earnings. Those who leave college without a degree see median lifetime earnings of \$1.9 million, almost \$1 million less than those who graduate with a bachelor's degree. Completing a bachelor's degree also opens the door to graduate education: workers with a master's degree have median earnings of \$3.2 million, and workers with a professional degree earn a median of \$4.7 million over a lifetime.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond the potential impact on individual earnings, racial/ethnic representation at selective colleges matters on a societal and institutional level. Diverse student bodies lead to better educational outcomes across multiple dimensions.<sup>25</sup> By increasing the diversity of selective institutions, greater numbers of underrepresented students will have access to opportunities and career paths that historically were denied them, such as the law; medicine; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)

20 Chetty et al., "Diversifying Society's Leaders?," 2023.

21 Carnevale et al., *Our Separate & Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018.

22 We examine disparities in funding for instruction and support services at selective and open-access institutions in Part II of this report.

23 Carnevale and Strohl, *Separate & Unequal*, 2013.

24 Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff*, 2021.

25 *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. President and Fellows of Harvard College and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. University of North Carolina, et al.* Brief of the American Educational Research Association, et al. as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Respondents, 2022.

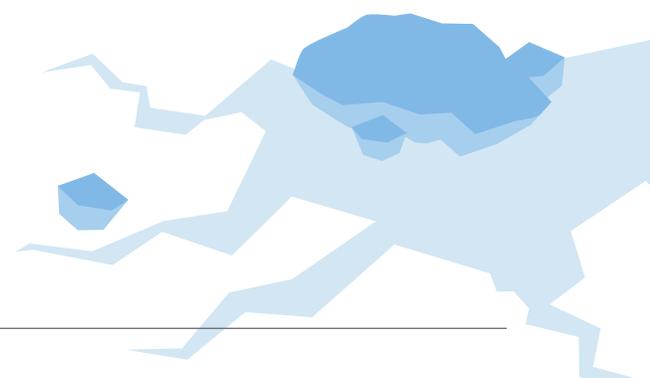
fields. It also has positive implications for economic vitality and innovation.<sup>26</sup>

The higher education system should be a beacon of opportunity for all. Instead, polarization across the system continues to generate and reproduce systemic inequities by race/ethnicity and class. Eliminating these disparities will require a whole-system approach beginning in K–12 that works toward both improving access at selective colleges and addressing disparate student outcomes at open-access ones. The *SFFA* ruling complicates the task of improving access at selective colleges, as evidence from public selective institutions in states where the consideration of race/ethnicity in the admissions process was already prohibited (including California, Florida, and Michigan) would suggest.<sup>27</sup>

Although class-conscious admissions practices have the potential to claw back some of the diversity that will inevitably be lost, they are unlikely to produce student shares that are proportional to the diversity in the total population.<sup>28</sup> Selective colleges will need to overhaul their current admissions practices if they hope to achieve enrollment that even remotely reflects the current diversity of the United States' college-age population. Given the large number of students that open-access institutions serve, these institutions have the opportunity to drive enormous change, particularly for lower-income and historically underrepresented minoritized students. Improving outcomes will require increased funding for the institutions themselves as well as better support, financial and otherwise, for students.

Finally, the disparities that we see by race/ethnicity and class in the higher education system in many ways mirror similar disparities in the K–12 system. Although the K–12 population is more diverse, with white students making up less than half of the total, schools and districts remain divided along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines.<sup>29</sup> This has implications for the resources that different groups of students have access to and for selective college recruitment trends. The need for K–12 reform is obvious but more easily said than done. To truly be successful, reform in K–12 will require a wholesale rethinking of the educational pipeline, and the connections between high school, college, and career.

The Supreme Court prohibition of race-conscious admissions, paired with selective institutions' historically poor track record in admitting students from low-income and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, means that we face enormous difficulties in reversing racial/ethnic and class-based inequality, not just in higher education but in society at large. The postsecondary system magnifies the inequalities generated by the K–12 system and projects these forward into the labor market. As a result, the postsecondary system remains one of the primary institutions driving the intergenerational reproduction of race/ethnicity and class privilege, despite efforts to equalize opportunity and the incremental progress that has been made over the past several decades.



26 Carnevale and Smith, “The Economic Value of Diversity,” 2016

27 Antonovics and Backes, “Were Minority Students Discouraged from Applying to California Campuses after the Affirmative Action Ban?,” 2013; Liu, “How Do Affirmative Action Bans Affect the Racial Composition of Postsecondary Students in Public Institutions?,” 2022; Long and Bateman, “Long-Run Changes in Underrepresentation After Affirmative Action Bans in Public Universities,” 2020; Meyer, “The End of Race-Conscious Admissions,” 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. President and Fellows of Harvard College and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. University of North Carolina, et al.* Brief for the University of Michigan as *Amicus Curiae* in Support of Respondents, 2022.

28 Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023; Kahlenberg, “The Affirmative Action That Colleges Really Need,” 2022; Kahlenberg and Potter, *A Better Affirmative Action*, 2012.

29 US Government Accountability Office, *K–12 Education*, 2022.

• The higher education system should be a beacon of opportunity for all. Instead, polarization across the system continues to generate and reproduce systemic inequities by race/ethnicity and class.



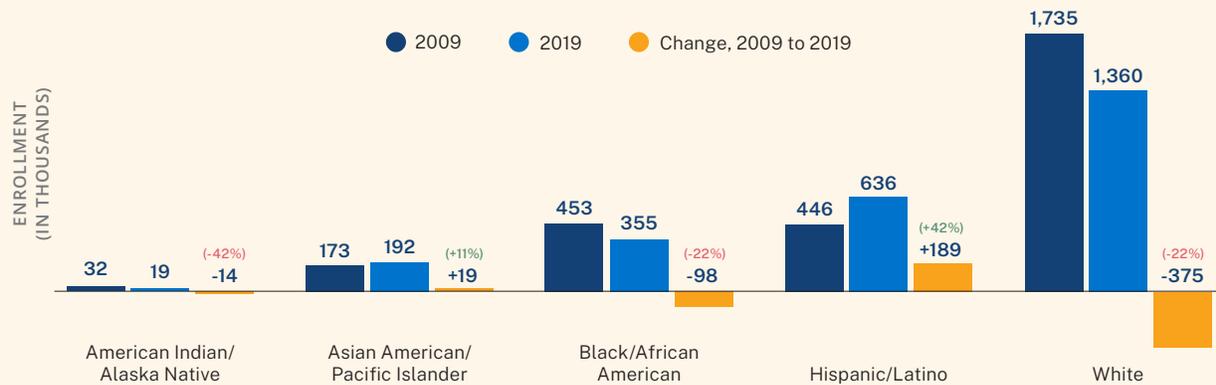
# Part I. The Higher Education System Continues to Be Segregated by Race/Ethnicity and Class.

**T**he demographics of the United States shifted significantly between 2009 and 2019. Large increases in the Hispanic/Latino population, coupled with slowing growth in the white population, accounted for much of this change. The Hispanic/Latino college-age population increased by 1.6 million from 2009 to 2019, while the white college-age population decreased by more than 2 million. Although these demographic shifts began well before 2009, they did not translate to Hispanic/Latino enrollments that were proportional with their share of the college-age population.<sup>30</sup> That paradigm has changed, as Hispanic/Latino students saw a 42 percent increase in freshman enrollment from 2009 to 2019 (**Figure 6**), far outpacing their growth in the college-age population. Due to these shifts, Hispanic/Latino shares of college enrollment were proportionate to their shares of the college-age population in 2019. Over this same time period, white student enrollment decreased by 22 percent.



FIGURE 6

College enrollment of Hispanic/Latino students increased by 189,000 from 2009 to 2019 while enrollment of white students decreased by 375,000.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Numbers have been rounded.

Asian American/Pacific Islander students also gained in total college enrollment. Meanwhile, Black/African American students lost close to a quarter of their total enrollment. The most significant losses occurred among American Indian/Alaska Native students, who experienced a 42 percent decline in total enrollment from 2009 to 2019.<sup>31</sup>

### Enrolling in college is not enough—students must come away with a credential to reap the rewards of postsecondary education.

College enrollment on its own does not necessarily translate to a diploma—nor does it generate the

earnings and career benefits that a college degree confers.<sup>32</sup> Graduation rates at open-access institutions lag behind selective colleges and universities. Disparities in outcomes are particularly stark for Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students. Despite proportionate enrollments across the broader postsecondary environment, underlying factors are keeping Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students<sup>33</sup> from reaping the benefits of participation in the higher education system.

A key factor in this disparity is differential enrollment across racial and ethnic groups at selective and open-access institutions. Growth in the Hispanic/Latino

31 It is not entirely clear what drove such a stark decline, but there is some suggestion that the Department of Education's introduction of a "two or more races" category in 2008 may have contributed. People of American Indian/Alaska Native descent are more likely than other groups to identify as two or more races, meaning that some students who previously would have been categorized as exclusively American Indian/Alaska Native are now in the two or more races category. The K–12 school system is also likely playing a role. Related research on class-based alternatives to race-conscious admissions found that factors associated with academic performance tend to limit access for Indigenous students. This suggests that the K–12 system is not adequately preparing this group for postsecondary education. US Department of Education, "Institutional Responsibility for Reporting Race and Ethnicity to IPEDS," 2007; Sykes and Laurium Evaluation Group, *Implementation of New Race/Ethnicity Categories in IPEDS*, 2012; Liebler et al., "America's Churning Races," 2017; Maxim et al., "Why the Federal Government Needs to Change How It Collects Data on Native Americans," 2023; Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023.

32 Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff*, 2021.

33 American Indian/Alaska Native students are still underrepresented in college enrollment overall, accounting for 0.9 percent of the college-age population but only 0.7 percent of enrollment.

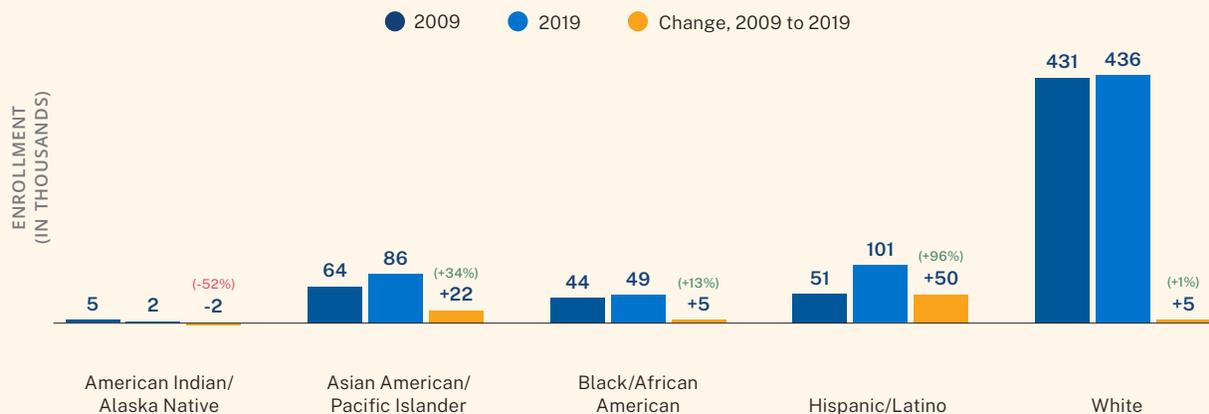
college-age population has translated to an increase at selective colleges of about 50,000 students from 2009 to 2019, almost doubling Hispanic/Latino selective enrollment over this period. Despite declines in overall enrollment among Black/African American students, their enrollment numbers at selective colleges also increased over the same time frame—albeit a much smaller increase of 5,000 students (Figure 7). At first glance these numbers are encouraging: more Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students at selective institutions is certainly better than fewer. However, they are still underrepresented relative to white and Asian American/Pacific Islander students. And while the white college-age population shrank

by 12 percent, white enrollment at selective colleges was effectively stable (growing by 1 percent). Meanwhile, Asian American/Pacific Islander students experienced a 34 percent increase in enrollment at selective colleges, as their college-age population grew by 55 percent.

**GROWTH IN THE HISPANIC/LATINO COLLEGE-AGE POPULATION HAS TRANSLATED TO AN INCREASE AT SELECTIVE COLLEGES OF ABOUT 50,000 STUDENTS FROM 2009 TO 2019.**

FIGURE 7

White student enrollment at selective institutions increased despite large decreases in the white college-age population.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron’s selectivity index (2014). Numbers have been rounded.

Despite numeric increases in enrollment, the shares of American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students who attend a selective institution are still small. Just 12 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, 14 percent of Black/African American students, and 16 percent of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in selective institutions in 2019 (Figure 8). While these were larger shares than in 2009 for most of these groups,<sup>34</sup> they are quite small relative to the 32 percent of white students and 45 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander students enrolled in selective colleges. In fact, despite white students' relatively small increase in enrollment at selective colleges, the share of white students attending selective colleges increased by 7 percentage points from 2009 to 2019.

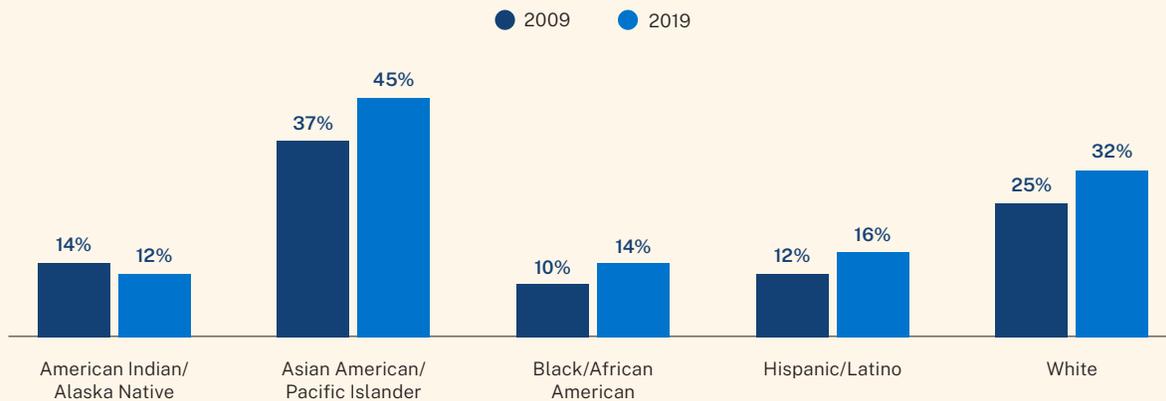
To better understand what shifts in enrollment shares mean in context with the changing racial/ethnic demographics of the college-age population, we created “representation ratios” to show whether racial/ethnic groups are overrepresented or underrepresented relative to their share of the college-age population (Figure 9). When juxtaposed against shifts in the college-age population, enrollment shares indicate that representation has not fundamentally changed from 2009 for most racial and ethnic groups.



**FIGURE 8**

**Close to half of all Asian American/Pacific Islander students and one-third of white students who are enrolled in college attend a selective college or university.**

VALUES REPRESENT THE SHARE OF ALL STUDENTS FROM EACH RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP WHO ARE ATTENDING A SELECTIVE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014).

34 The share of American Indian/Alaska Native students at selective colleges decreased by 2 percentage points from 2009 to 2019.

**WHEN JUXTAPOSED AGAINST SHIFTS IN THE COLLEGE-AGE POPULATION, ENROLLMENT SHARES INDICATE THAT REPRESENTATION HAS NOT FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED FROM 2009 FOR MOST RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS.**

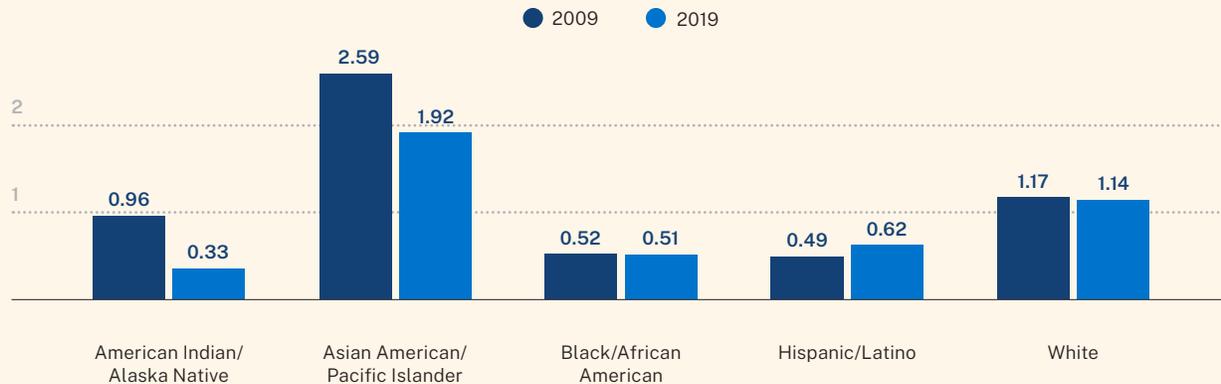
The representation of white students at selective institutions still comfortably surpasses their share of the total college-age population, largely due to “white flight” from open-access colleges and stability in their enrollment at selective institutions. The same is true for Asian American/Pacific Islander

representation at selective institutions: as their population grows within the broader college-age population, their overconcentration at selective institutions has lessened but is still close to twice their share of the college-age population.

Meanwhile, Black/African American student representation is effectively unchanged, and still far below parity with their share of the college-age population. Hispanic/Latino students have made some progress toward parity but similarly remain underrepresented. American Indian/Alaska Native student representation at selective colleges declined considerably, from nearly even representation with their share of the college-age population in 2009 to just 0.33 of their share of the college-age population in 2019.

**FIGURE 9**

**There has been little change in representation at selective colleges of Black/African American and white students, while Hispanic/Latino students have made slight progress toward parity.**



Values less than 1 indicate underrepresentation in freshman enrollment relative to the group's share of the college-age population, and values greater than 1 indicate overrepresentation.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014; and US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 2009 and 2019.

Note: Racial/ethnic groups with representation ratios of less than one are underrepresented relative to their share of the college-age population. Those with representation ratios that exceed one have a disproportionate share of seats relative to their share of the college-age population. The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014).

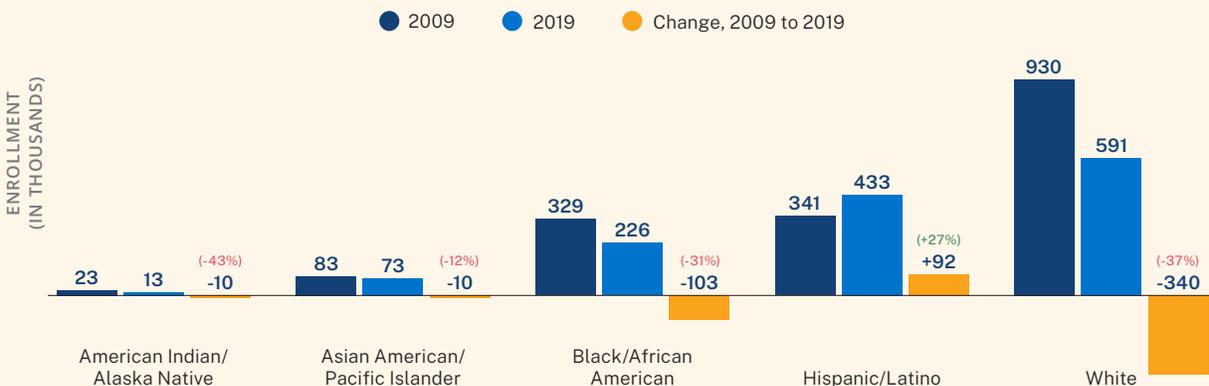
## Falling enrollment at open-access institutions translated to declining representation among almost every racial/ethnic group.

At open-access institutions, the story is one of decline across almost every racial and ethnic group, other than Hispanic/Latino students (Figure 10). Through this lens, we see that the majority of losses in overall white students' enrollment was confined to open-access institutions, where their numbers fell by 37 percent. Over the same time period, Asian American/Pacific Islander open-access enrollment declined by 12 percent and Black/African American enrollment at open-access institutions declined by close to a third.

Representation at open-access institutions declined across all racial and ethnic groups other than Hispanic/Latino students (Figure 11). This comes amid a broader flight away from open-access colleges, as enrollments at those institutions contract. Although there are now numerically fewer Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native students, these groups, along with Hispanic/Latino students, remain overconcentrated at open-access colleges. Meanwhile, the number of Asian American/Pacific Islander and white students attending these institutions has fallen off, leaving both groups underrepresented at open-access colleges and universities.

FIGURE 10

Hispanic/Latino students were the only racial/ethnic group to see an increase in enrollment at open-access institutions.

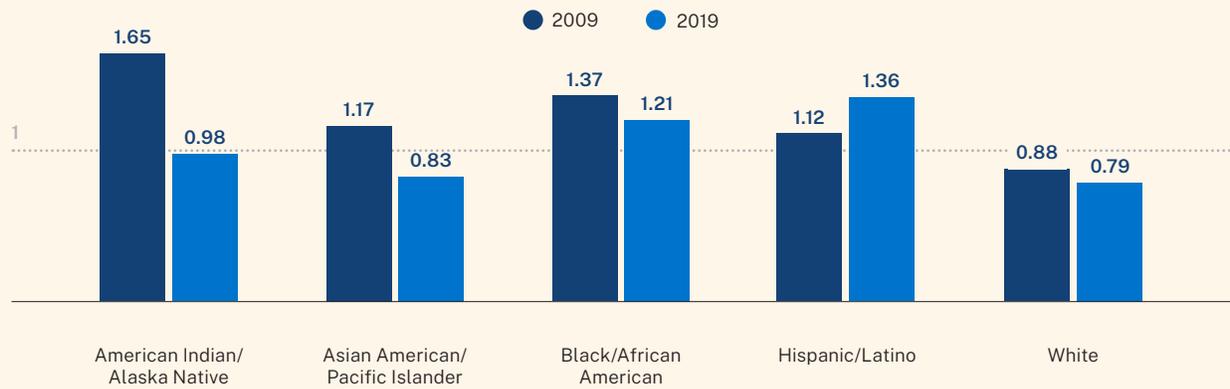


Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014), as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions. Numbers have been rounded.

**FIGURE 11**

**Hispanic/Latino students were the only racial/ethnic group to experience an increase in representation at open-access colleges.**



Values less than 1 indicate underrepresentation in freshman enrollment relative to the group's share of the college-age population, and values greater than 1 indicate overrepresentation.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014; and US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 2009 and 2019.

Note: Racial/ethnic groups with representation ratios of less than one are underrepresented relative to their share of the college-age population. Those with representation ratios that exceed one have a disproportionate share of seats relative to their share of the college-age population. The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014), as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.



## Pell Grant recipients remain disproportionately concentrated at open-access colleges and universities.

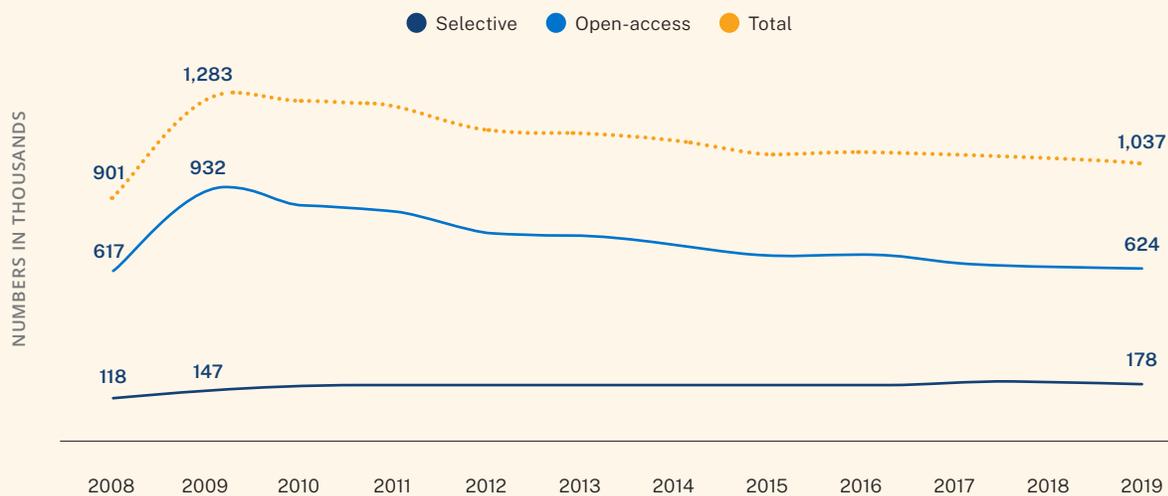
College enrollments among students from low-income backgrounds, as measured by Pell Grant reciprocity, spiked during the Great Recession. This came as large numbers of students gravitated to college to wait out a difficult labor market.<sup>35</sup> After reaching a high-water mark in enrollments in 2009, Pell student enrollment

has been steadily declining (Figure 12). This decrease is driven by declines at open-access institutions. Conversely, enrollment among Pell Grant recipients is slowly increasing at selective colleges—although not enough to offset declines overall.

While first-time enrollment of Pell Grant recipients at selective colleges increased by approximately 30,000 students from 2009 to 2019, they still make up a small share of overall enrollment. Less than one

FIGURE 12

Enrollments of students with Pell Grants are slowly declining, driven by a steady drop-off in Pell Grant recipients at open-access institutions.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of student finance data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008–09 through 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time, full-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron’s selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron’s selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron’s and all less-than-four-year institutions. Numbers have been rounded.

35 The spike in Pell Grant reciprocity was also due, in part, to broader eligibility rules passed in 2007 and 2008 and an increase in the maximum grant in 2009. New America, “Pell Grant Funding and History,” 2024.

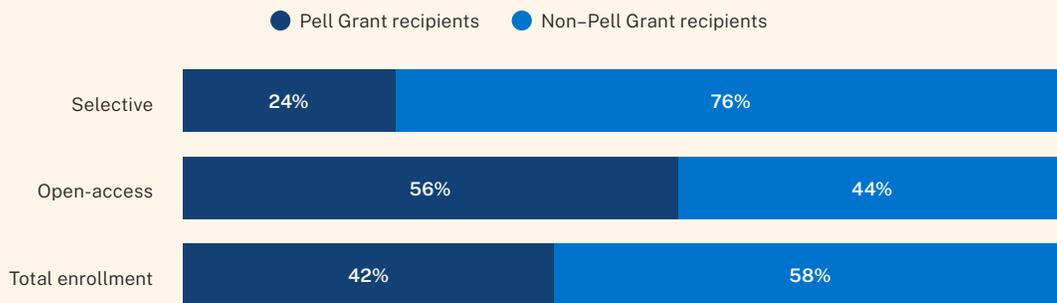
in four enrollees at selective colleges was a Pell Grant recipient in 2019 (Figure 13). By contrast, Pell Grant recipients account for more than half of student enrollment at open-access institutions. The share of Pell Grant recipients varies further across the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index. At the 92 most selective institutions, Pell Grant recipients make up only 17 percent of enrollment. In the second most selective tier, Pell Grant recipients account for 20 percent

of enrollment, and at the third most selective tier this group makes up 28 percent of enrollment.

**AT THE 92 MOST SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS, PELL GRANT RECIPIENTS MAKE UP ONLY 17 PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT.**

**FIGURE 13**

**Less than one in four students at the 498 most selective colleges was a Pell Grant recipient in 2019.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of student finance data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time, full-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

These shares contribute to continued underrepresentation of Pell Grant recipients at selective colleges. As of 2019, the representation of Pell Grant recipients at selective institutions relative to their overall college enrollment was 0.57, meaning that they are only 57 percent of the way toward proportional representation with overall Pell Grant recipient enrollment in higher education. Their representation ratio at open-access colleges is 1.32, a slight increase from 1.26 in 2009 (Figure 14).

**PELL GRANT RECIPIENT SHARES AT SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS ARE ONLY 57 PERCENT OF THE WAY TOWARD PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION WITH OVERALL PELL GRANT RECIPIENT ENROLLMENT.**

FIGURE 14

The representation of students who receive Pell Grants has increased marginally overall at selective colleges, but they remain severely underrepresented at these institutions.



Values less than 1 indicate underrepresentation in freshman enrollment relative to the group's share of the college-age population, and values greater than 1 indicate overrepresentation.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Pell Grant and non-Pell Grant recipient groups with representation ratios of less than one are underrepresented relative to their share of total first-time, full-time enrollment. Those with representation ratios that exceed one have a disproportionate share of seats relative to their share of total first-time, full-time enrollment. The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time, full-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

## The pandemic further altered college enrollments.



This report focuses on enrollment trends from 2009 to 2019 because the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic distorted broader enrollment trends. Many students opted not to enroll in college in fall 2020, resulting in an 8 percent decline in overall degree-seeking enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020. In the years since, these losses were somewhat ameliorated but still left total enrollment in fall 2022 4 percent below enrollment totals in 2019.

In the first year of the pandemic, declines occurred across all racial and ethnic groups. American Indian/Alaska Native student enrollment showed the largest decline (14 percent in 2020), followed closely by enrollment of Black/African American students (12 percent in 2020). Notably, the vast majority of this enrollment loss was concentrated at open-access institutions, continuing the trend of losses at this subset of institutions. From 2019 to 2020, enrollment at open-access colleges and universities decreased by 12 percent from an already depleted enrollment base and have yet to fully recover. As of 2022, open-access enrollment remained 9 percent below what it was in 2019. Within open-access colleges, Black/African American students saw the most significant enrollment decline (18 percent) of any racial/ethnic groups during the pandemic.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, enrollment at selective institutions decreased by only 4 percent from 2019 to 2020. American Indian/Alaska Native students saw the largest relative decline with a 13 percent decrease in enrollment. White enrollment decreased by 7 percent, while Asian American/Pacific Islander enrollment increased by 3 percent. Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino enrollment decreased only marginally, though these groups remained significantly underrepresented relative to their shares of the college-age population (**Figure 15**). As of 2022, enrollment at selective institutions was 5 percent higher than it was in 2019.

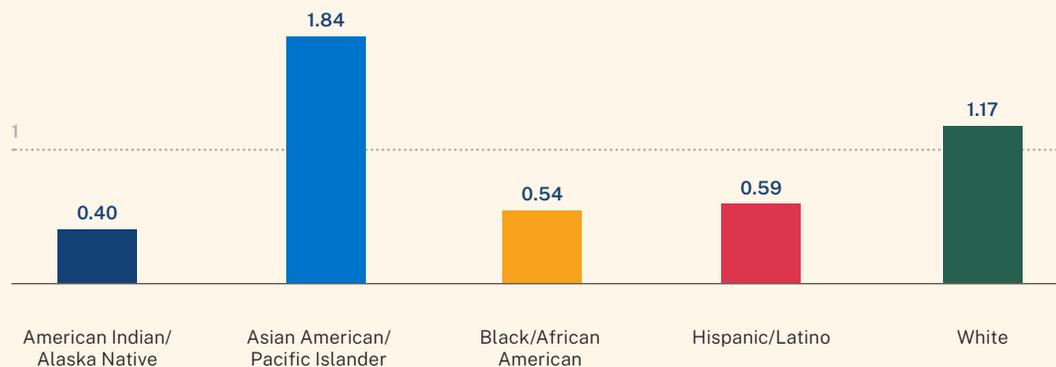
Low-income students were among the most impacted by the pandemic. Enrollment of degree-seeking students who received a Pell Grant decreased by 14 percent from 2019 to 2020. Again, the majority of this decrease was at open-access institutions. Enrollment of students who receive Pell Grants decreased by 19 percent at open-access institutions, a decline of more than 100,000 students. Pell Grant recipient enrollment at selective colleges decreased by 4 percent, or about 7,000 students.



The drop in enrollment was spurred by a range of pandemic-related crises: health concerns related to COVID, mental health issues, and a rapid and not-always seamless transition to online learning.<sup>37</sup> Some students dropped out due to financial challenges, while others left to take advantage of higher wages being offered in typically lower-paid sectors,<sup>38</sup> such as accommodation and food services.<sup>39</sup> Some of these COVID-driven enrollment pressures have lessened, leading to a recovery in undergraduate enrollments in 2022 and 2023. However, enrollment totals in 2023 have still failed to reach 2019 levels.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, colleges and universities face a more severe demographic cliff that will limit the pool of potential traditional college-age students further in the years ahead.<sup>41</sup>

FIGURE 15

**White and Asian American/Pacific Islander students remained overrepresented at selective colleges in 2020, while American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students remained underrepresented.**



Values less than 1 indicate underrepresentation in freshman enrollment relative to the group's share of the college-age population, and values greater than 1 indicate overrepresentation.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2020–21; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014; and US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 2020.

Note: Racial/ethnic groups with representation ratios of less than one are underrepresented relative to their share of the college-age population. Those with representation ratios that exceed one have a disproportionate share of seats relative to their share of the college-age population. The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic year. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014).

37 Gallup and Lumina Foundation, *The State of Higher Education 2022 Report*, 2022; Saul, "The Pandemic Hit the Working Class Hard," 2021.

38 Saul, "Requests for U.S. College Aid Are Down, with Experts Blaming the Pandemic," 2021.

39 DeSilver, "Many U.S. Workers Are Seeing Bigger Paychecks in Pandemic Era, but Gains Aren't Spread Evenly," 2021.

40 Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Current Term Enrollment Estimates, May 2023 and January 2024. Fall 2023 enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) was not yet available during the development of this report.

41 Grawe, *The Agile College*, 2021.



## Part II. Significant Gaps in Funding between Selective and Open-Access Institutions Contribute to Widely Differing Outcomes.

**U**nderstanding stratification by race/ethnicity and class across the higher education system is important because the resources and support available to students are vastly different between selective and open-access colleges. Selective colleges tend to see much higher revenue from sources such as tuition and auxiliary programs, and some selective public colleges get higher levels of appropriations from their states than other public colleges in the same states.<sup>42</sup> As yet another measure of the disparate resources available at these two classes of institutions, endowments are exponentially larger at selective institutions. In fact, about half of open-access institutions don't have endowments, while the median endowment at selective colleges is about \$195 million.<sup>43</sup> While endowments are generally not discretionary funds, they nevertheless provide a financial cushion and funding streams that can be used to support the student experience.

42 Carnevale et al., *Our Separate & Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018.

43 Authors' calculation using IPEDS finance data, fiscal year 2019–20. The median endowment at open-access institutions is roughly \$7,000. For more details on endowments by college selectivity level, see Appendix D.

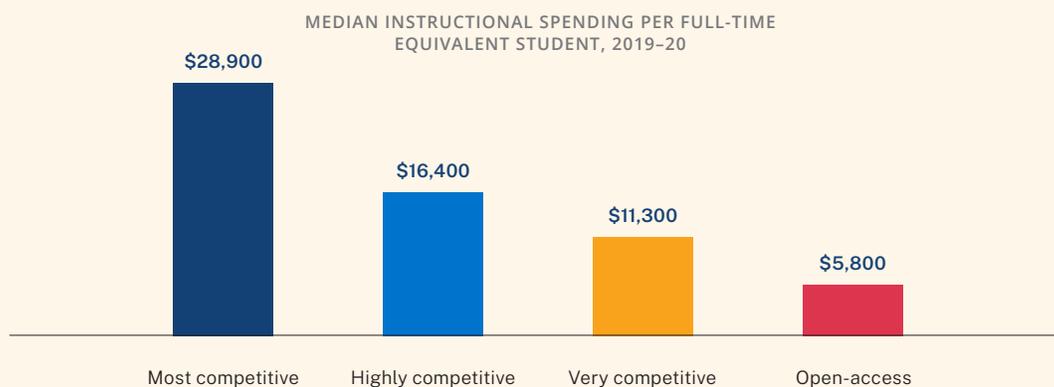
Funding and resources can vary considerably by institution, but generally speaking, the more selective an institution, the more likely it is to have access to greater resources. Institutions that can tap into these large resource streams are better positioned to invest more in all facets of the college experience, including those arenas that have the most impact on student success. For example, median per-student spending on instruction at selective colleges was \$13,200 in 2019, more than double per-student instructional spending at open-access colleges. This disparity becomes even more stark as selectivity increases.<sup>44</sup> Median instructional spending per full-time equivalent (FTE) student at the 92 most competitive institutions

**MEDIAN INSTRUCTIONAL SPENDING PER FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT STUDENT AT THE 92 MOST COMPETITIVE INSTITUTIONS IS \$28,900, ALMOST FIVE TIMES HIGHER THAN INSTRUCTIONAL SPENDING OF \$5,800 PER STUDENT AT OPEN-ACCESS INSTITUTIONS.**

is \$28,900, almost five times higher than instructional spending of \$5,800 per student at open-access institutions (Figure 16).<sup>45</sup>

FIGURE 16

**Median instructional spending per student is almost five times higher at the most competitive institutions than at open-access institutions.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). The most competitive category comprises the 92 institutions classified in the first tier, highly competitive comprises the 101 institutions classified in the second tier, and very competitive comprises the 305 institutions classified in the third tier. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

44 The 498 institutions described as "selective" in this report can be broken down into three tiers: most competitive, highly competitive, and very competitive. The first tier comprises 92 institutions, the second tier comprises 101 institutions, and the third tier comprises 305 institutions. These include both private and public institutions. Overall, the institutions included in the top three tiers of selectivity account for 26 percent of all first-time enrollments at degree-granting institutions.

45 Authors' calculation using data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), fiscal year 2019–20.

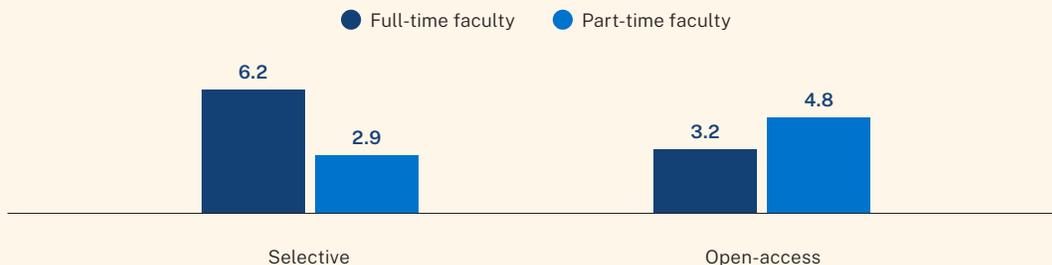
Increased instructional spending allows for more investment in faculty, meaning smaller class sizes and more opportunities for students to develop relationships with professors. Selective colleges have more faculty per student overall, and more importantly, have more full-time faculty per student. Research shows that there are many benefits to full-time versus part-time faculty, including increased availability to students and better connections within the college or university.<sup>46</sup> Selective colleges have 6.2 full-time faculty for every 100 students, compared to only 3.2 at open-access colleges (**Figure 17**). Open-access institutions depend more on part-time faculty, which has been shown to negatively impact performance in subsequent courses<sup>47</sup> and reduce graduation rates at four-year institutions.<sup>48</sup> Greater reliance on part-time

faculty has also been shown to decrease the chance that students will transfer to four-year institutions from community colleges.<sup>49</sup> Given the greater lifetime earnings that a bachelor's degree confers, students who do not transfer are missing the potential benefits of greater financial security.

Similarly, per-student spending on academic support and student services, which also contribute to student success, is more than twice as high at selective institutions as at open-access colleges (**Figure 18**). Lower spending on student services at open-access institutions is especially concerning: research has found that increases in this spending are even more impactful at institutions with higher shares of students from low-income backgrounds.<sup>50</sup>

**FIGURE 17**

**Selective colleges have almost double the full-time faculty per 100 students that open-access colleges have.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

46 Alshehri, "Instructional Practices of Part-Time Faculty at Two-Year Institutions," 2020; Umbach, "How Effective Are They?," 2007; Eagan and Jaeger, "Effects of Exposure to Part-Time Faculty on Community College Transfer," 2009; Schuetz, "Instructional Practices of Part-Time and Full-Time Faculty," 2002.

47 Ran and Sanders, "Instruction Quality or Working Condition?," 2020; Xu, "Academic Performance in Community Colleges," 2019.

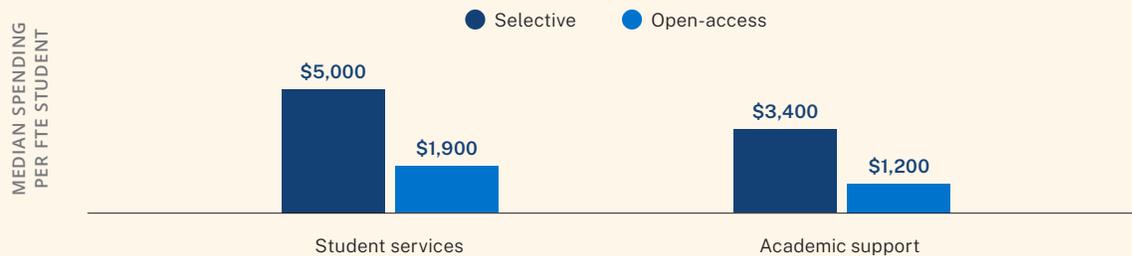
48 Ehrenberg and Zhang, "Do Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty Matter?," 2005.

49 Eagan and Jaeger, "Effects of Exposure to Part-Time Faculty on Community College Transfer," 2009.

50 Webber and Ehrenberg, "Do Expenditures Other Than Instructional Expenditures Affect Graduation and Persistence Rates in American Higher Education?," 2010.

FIGURE 18

**Selective colleges spend over twice as much per student on student services and academic support as open-access colleges.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

FIGURE 19

**Median academic-support spending per student is more than seven times higher at the most competitive institutions than at open-access institutions, and student-services spending is more than four times higher.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). The most competitive category comprises the 92 institutions classified in the first tier, highly competitive comprises the 101 institutions classified in the second tier, and very competitive comprises the 305 institutions classified in the third tier. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

Again, the disparity in student-services and academic-support spending becomes even more stark as selectivity increases. Median academic-support spending per student at the 92 most competitive institutions is \$8,700, more than seven times higher

than academic-support spending per student at open-access institutions (Figure 19). Likewise, student-services spending at the most competitive institutions is more than four times higher than at open-access institutions.

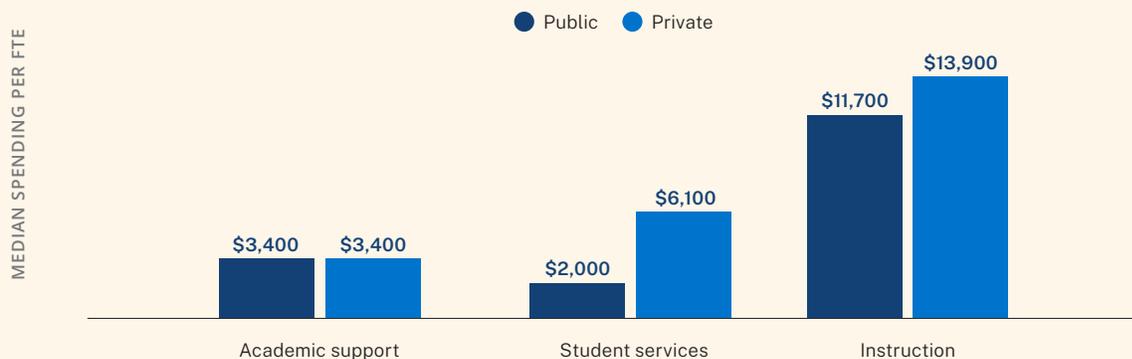
## Spending differs at public versus private colleges.



Spending can vary quite dramatically by institution, particularly when comparing public institutions to private ones. Almost three-quarters of selective institutions are private, compared to less than half of open-access institutions. Spending per student tends to be higher at selective private colleges than at selective public ones. Median instructional spending per student is more than \$2,000 higher at private selective institutions than public selective institutions, and spending on student services at private selective institutions is more than three times higher than at public selective colleges and universities (Figure 20). Academic-support spending, however, is equivalent between the two.

FIGURE 20

Private selective institutions spend more on instruction and student services than selective public colleges.



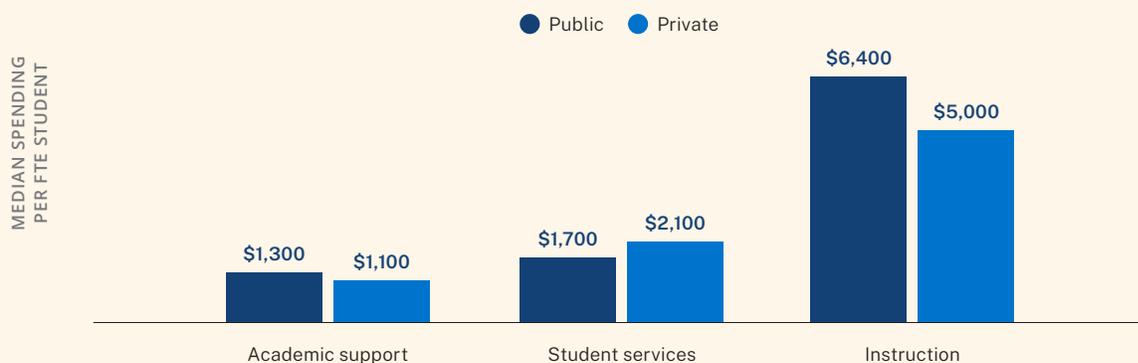
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Private institutions include those that are both nonprofit and for-profit. Just one private selective institution is for-profit.

These patterns differ slightly at open-access institutions. Median instructional spending per student is \$1,400 higher at public open-access institutions than at private ones. Median spending on academic support at public open-access institutions is slightly higher as well. For student services, however, median spending per student is higher at private open-access institutions (**Figure 21**).

FIGURE 21

**Private open-access institutions spend less than public open-access institutions on academic support and instruction, but spend more on student services.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Data are based on 12-month full-time-equivalent (FTE) enrollment. Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions. Private institutions include those that are both nonprofit and for-profit.

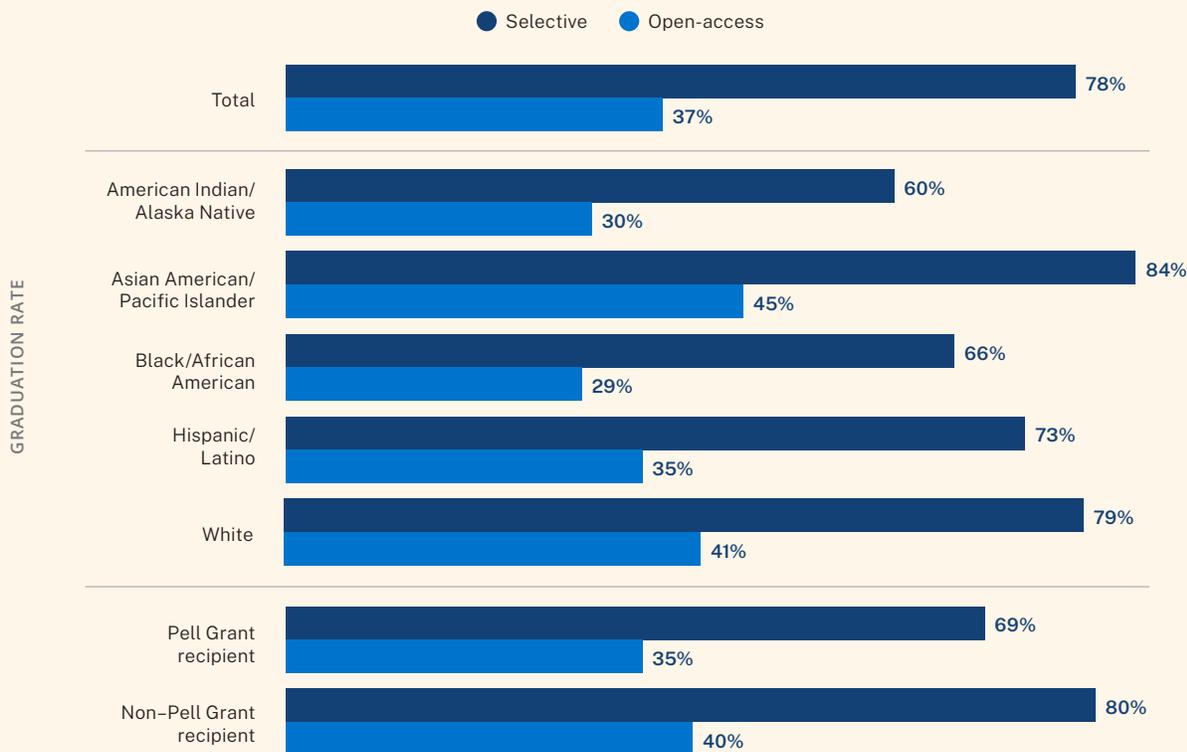
### Institutional funding disparities contribute to vastly different student outcomes.

Those selective colleges with far greater resources also boast much higher graduation rates, more than double those at open-access institutions. This disparity remains regardless of students’ race, ethnicity, or Pell Grant reciprocity status. (Figure 22). This is not a new trend: the disparity has only intensified since 2013, when the overall six-year completion rate was 40 percent at open-access institutions and 73 percent at selective colleges.<sup>51</sup>

Beneath these topline numbers, even greater disparities exist across the top three tiers of the most selective colleges. Gaps in graduation rates between American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students and their white and Asian American/Pacific Islander peers are smallest at the nation’s 92 most selective institutions (Figure 23). Gaps in graduation rates between students who received Pell Grants and those who did not are also smallest at the most selective institutions.

FIGURE 22

#### Graduation rates are higher at selective colleges regardless of race/ethnicity or Pell Grant status.



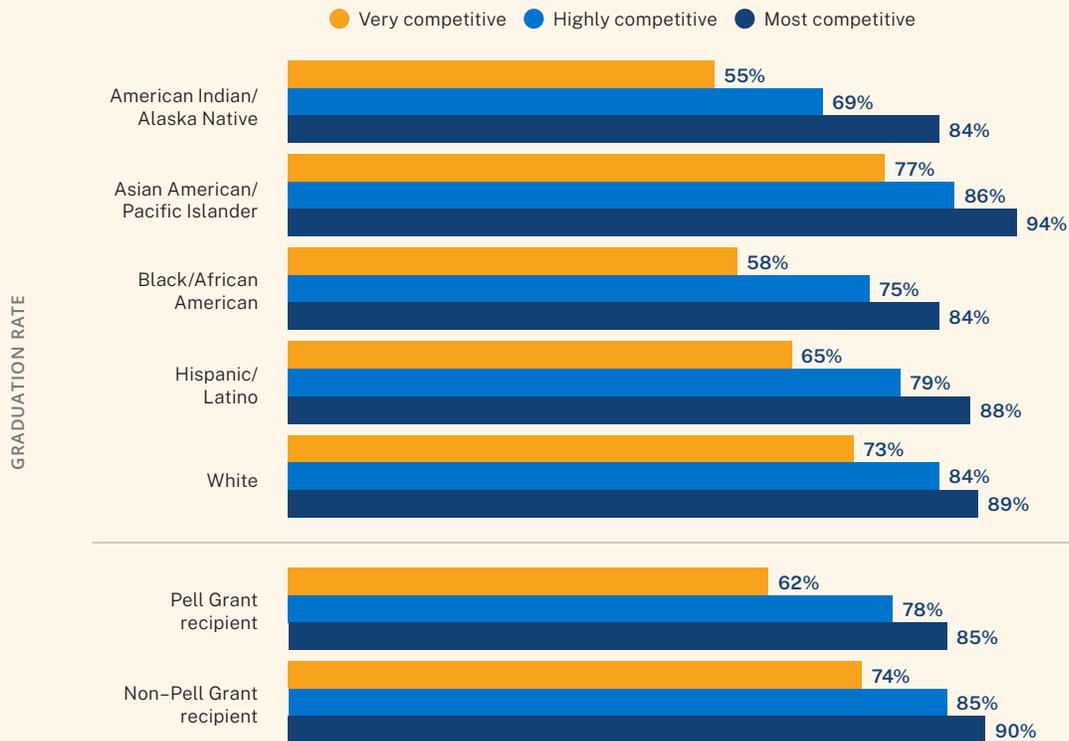
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), graduation cohort year 2015 (four-year) and graduation cohort year 2018 (two-year); and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Graduation rates are based on completion within 150 percent of normal time. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron’s selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron’s selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron’s and all less-than-four-year institutions.

51 Carnevale and Strohl, *Separate & Unequal*, 2013. Four hundred and sixty-eight selective colleges were examined in the 2013 *Separate & Unequal* report, based on the 2009 Barron’s classifications.

FIGURE 23

The gap in graduation outcomes by race/ethnicity and Pell Grant status is smallest at the 92 most selective colleges.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), graduation cohort year 2015; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Graduation rates are based on completion within 150 percent of normal time. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). The most competitive category comprises the 92 institutions classified in the first tier, highly competitive comprises the 101 institutions classified in the second tier, and very competitive comprises the 305 institutions classified in the third tier.

### GAPS IN GRADUATION RATES BETWEEN STUDENTS WHO RECEIVED PELL GRANTS AND THOSE WHO DID NOT ARE ALSO SMALLEST AT THE MOST SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS.

There is some debate about how much impact top colleges and universities have on these graduation rates. As discussed previously, the most selective

colleges generally have far greater resources to invest in students, which has been found to positively impact degree completion.<sup>52</sup> That said, the students who attend selective colleges also perhaps have the highest chances of graduating in the first place. The acceptance rates at institutions such as Stanford, MIT, and Harvard have fallen to 4 percent or lower,<sup>53</sup> meaning these institutions have their pick of the most academically qualified high school graduates. Meanwhile, the groups that would benefit most—academically qualified lower-

52 Deming and Walters, "The Impact of Price Caps and Spending Cuts on US Postsecondary Attainment," 2017. This analysis was limited to public institutions.

53 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), fall 2022.

income and racial/ethnic minority students—are less likely to apply to these colleges and instead attend less-selective institutions for which they are overqualified.<sup>54</sup> As a result, a subset of academically qualified lower-income students miss out on the potential opportunities and more generous financial aid provided at the most selective institutions.<sup>55</sup> Those who do apply and are accepted, however, excel and graduate in similar numbers to their higher-SES peers.<sup>56</sup>

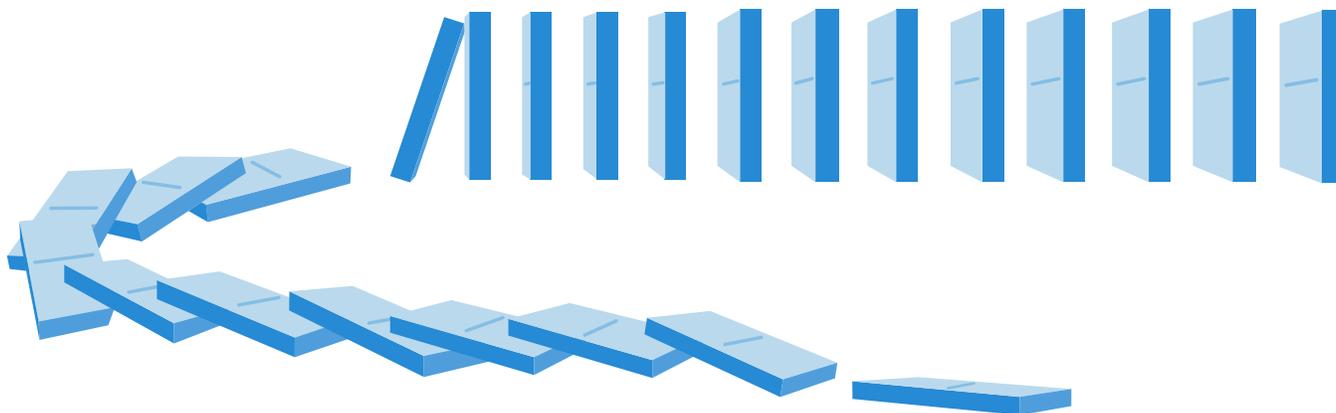
As a lever of social mobility, college selectivity matters most for lower-income students and American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students. Under our current system, academically prepared and well-connected students at the most

**AS A RESULT, A SUBSET OF ACADEMICALLY QUALIFIED LOWER-INCOME STUDENTS MISS OUT ON THE POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND MORE GENEROUS FINANCIAL AID PROVIDED AT THE MOST SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS.**

selective colleges benefit from instructional spending that is nearly five times greater per student than at open-access colleges. In other words, the greatest financial resources are being lavished on the most academically prepared students. Meanwhile, those who need assistance most are less likely to attend institutions that have the resources to provide it.

### **Greater resources are linked to better post-graduation outcomes.**

Resources matter because outcomes matter. Although there is growing skepticism in the public discourse around the intrinsic value of a four-year degree, most jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage require a bachelor's degree.<sup>57</sup> Over the course of a career, a person with a bachelor's degree earns a median of \$2.8 million. By contrast, a person who attends some college but does not earn a degree earns a median of \$1.9 million.<sup>58</sup> In the more immediate term, annual earnings among younger workers with bachelor's degrees are 50 percent higher than those with some college but no degree (Figure 24). A further benefit of the bachelor's degree is that it opens the door to a graduate degree. Students from selective colleges



54 Black et al., "Academic Undermatching of High-Achieving Minority Students," 2015; Hoxby and Avery, "The Missing 'One-Offs,'" 2013; Jaschik, "The Students Who Aren't Coming," 2023.

55 Bowen et al., *Crossing the Finish Line*, 2009.

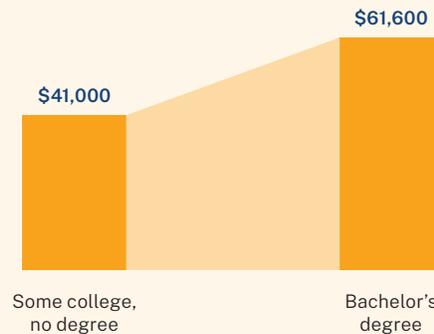
56 Giancola and Kahlenberg, *True Merit*, 2016.

57 Carnevale et al., *Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs*, 2018.

58 Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff*, 2021. Earnings can vary by major and occupation.

FIGURE 24

**A bachelor's degree offers a significant annual earnings boost to early-career workers relative to those with some college but no degree.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from Table 502.30 of the Digest of Education Statistics, 2021.

Note: Figures represent median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers age 25–34. Numbers have been rounded.

obtain graduate degrees at a 60 percent higher rate than students who attend open-access colleges.<sup>59</sup> Graduate degree attainment offers even greater returns, with median lifetime earnings ranging from \$3.2 million for a master's degree to \$4.7 million for a professional degree, such as a law or medical degree.<sup>60</sup>

Interventions that put more students on the bachelor's degree pathway and give them the resources and support to finish the credential would have a meaningful and positive impact on young peoples' financial futures.<sup>61</sup> Postsecondary education is foundational to landing a good job, but it can become an unattainable goal for too many young people as a result of the time and expense required to earn a degree. The high cost of college is a deterrent to some, who believe it is out of their reach. And, too often, even when Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students do complete

**INTERVENTIONS THAT PUT MORE STUDENTS ON THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE PATHWAY AND GIVE THEM THE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO FINISH THE CREDENTIAL WOULD HAVE A MEANINGFUL AND POSITIVE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLES' FINANCIAL FUTURES.**

a degree, they leave school with disproportionately high levels of debt, hindering their ability to build generational wealth.<sup>62</sup> Noncompletion is a particularly urgent concern at open-access institutions given the disproportionate concentration of Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and lower-income students at these colleges.

59 Carnevale and Strohl, *Separate & Unequal*, 2013.

60 Carnevale et al., *The College Payoff*, 2021. Earnings can vary by major and occupation.

61 Carnevale et al., *What Works*, 2023.

62 Carnevale et al., *The Uncertain Pathway from Youth to a Good Job*, 2022.

## Graduation outcomes vary even more when race/ethnicity and gender are factored in.



Currently, about 60 percent of all college undergraduates are women.<sup>63</sup> Not only are women enrolling in greater numbers, they graduate at a higher rate than men, too, at both selective institutions and open-access colleges (**Figure 25**). Some of the deepest divides in graduation outcomes exist between American Indian/Alaska Native men and women, Black/African American men and women, and Hispanic/Latino men and women. For example, graduation rates at open-access colleges are 6 percentage points higher for Black/African American women than Black/African American men, and this gap widens to 10 percentage points at selective colleges.

Cost, along with the need to support their families, are the top two reasons why both male and female adults without a bachelor's degree say they do not have a four-year degree, according to a 2021 Pew Research Center Survey. However, men without a degree are more likely than women without a degree to say that they “just didn’t want to” obtain a four-year degree (34 percent among men without a degree, versus 25 percent among women without a degree). Men are also slightly more likely to say that more education was not essential for the career they wanted (26 percent among men without a degree, versus 20 percent among women without a degree).<sup>64</sup> The latter point is reflected in other workforce research, which finds that men tend to have more, better-compensated job opportunities available to them that require no more than a high school diploma or some college.<sup>65</sup>

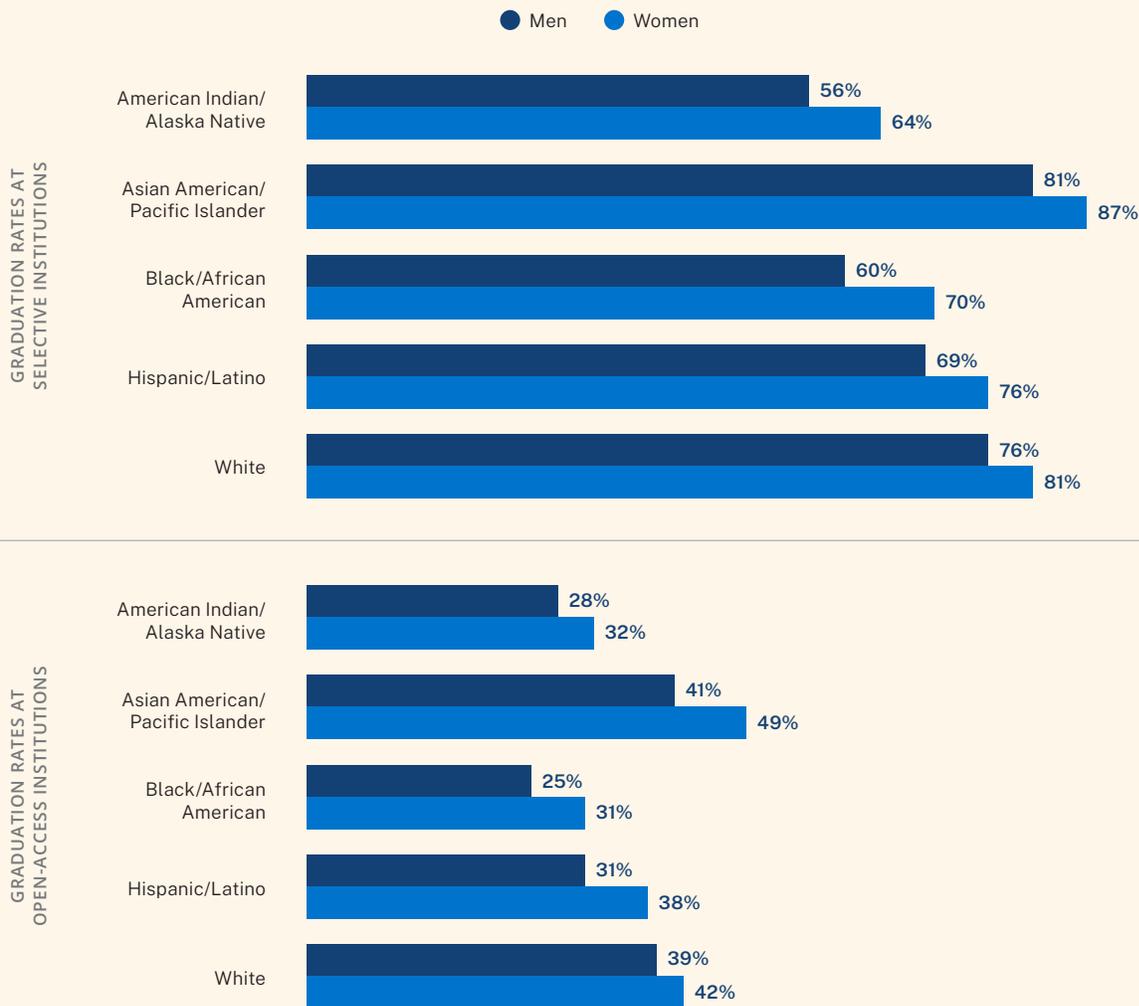
63 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; Parker, “What’s Behind the Growing Gap Between Men and Women in College Completion?,” 2021.

64 Parker, “What’s Behind the Growing Gap Between Men and Women in College Completion?,” 2021.

65 Carnevale et al., *What Works*, 2023.

FIGURE 25

Women are graduating at a higher rate than men across all racial and ethnic groups, at both open-access and selective institutions.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), graduation cohort year 2015 (four-year) and graduation cohort year 2018 (two-year); and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Graduation rates are based on completion within 150 percent of normal time. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.



# Part III. College Costs Are an Additional Barrier and Disproportionately Burden Lower-Income and Racial/Ethnic Minority Students with Debt.

**P**aying the full “sticker price” for college is impossible for many students and families. Average total costs are around \$35,000 across all four-year undergraduate institutions.<sup>66</sup> At a handful of the most selective colleges and universities, total costs neared \$90,000 for the 2023–24 academic year.<sup>67</sup> Given these costs, paying out of pocket is clearly not a viable option for most families. But zeroing in on sticker price misses the truth of the matter: not everyone pays full freight. The real cost students bear is known as the “net price.” At the most selective colleges and universities, 44 percent of students pay

66 Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from Table 330.40 of the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2019–20. The cost is based on first-time, full-time students living on-campus or off-campus and not living with family in the 2020–21 academic year. Total cost varies by control of the institution. The average total cost for in-state students at public four-year institutions is almost \$26,000, while average total cost for private nonprofit four-year institutions is more than \$54,000.

67 Picchi, “Ivy League Costs Creep Close to \$90,000 per Year,” 2023.

the full price.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, many lower- and middle-income students pay less once grants and other aid are factored in.<sup>69</sup>

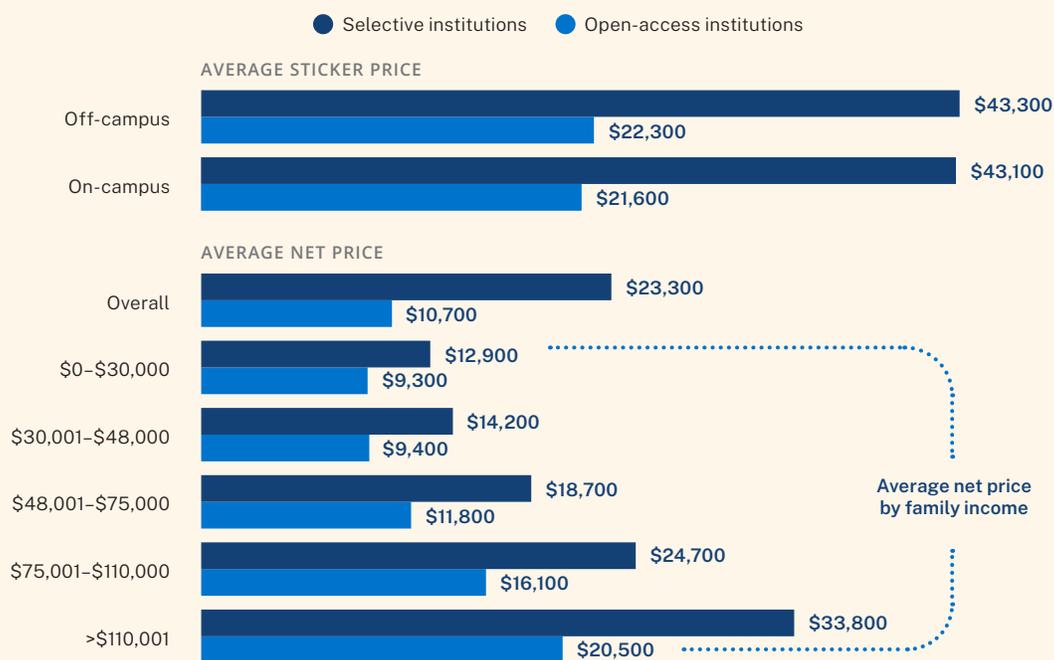
However, the net price varies across institutions and by students, who often do not know how much they will be expected to pay until they have applied, been accepted, and received their financial aid offers. This lack of transparency about the true out-of-pocket cost, coupled with high sticker prices, often deters students from lower-income backgrounds from applying, despite

the fact that they would pay much less on average than their higher-income peers.

The difference between sticker price and out-of-pocket cost can be especially consequential for students from lower-income backgrounds who are considering applying to selective institutions. The average total cost of attending a selective institution in 2019 was over \$43,000, nearly double that of the average costs at open-access institutions (Figure 26). This price likely seems completely out of reach for many. However, the

FIGURE 26

**Students whose family incomes are below \$30,000 per year pay less than a third of the average sticker price at selective institutions.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Average sticker price refers to the average total cost of attendance, which includes tuition and fees; books and supplies; and room, board, and other expenses. Average sticker price and average net price are weighted by the number of first-time, full-time students awarded Title IV aid. Income ranges based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reporting of average net price. Selective institutions include the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

68 Kantrowitz, "Who Pays the Full Sticker Price for a College Education?," 2017. The most selective institutions in this analysis were those that have acceptance rates of less than 10 percent.

69 National Association of College and University Business Officers, *2022 Tuition Discounting Study*, 2023. Prices were discounted by an average of 56 percent for first-year students at private, nonprofit colleges in the 2022–23 academic year.

**THIS LACK OF TRANSPARENCY  
OFTEN DETERS STUDENTS FROM  
LOWER-INCOME BACKGROUNDS  
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ON AVERAGE THAN THEIR HIGHER-  
INCOME PEERS.**

average net price is much lower, at \$23,300, and for students from lower-income backgrounds, it is even less. The average net price at selective colleges for students whose families' income is less than \$30,000 is \$12,900, less than a third of the sticker price and about half of the overall average net price. While still more expensive than the average net price of attending an open-access institution for these students, the gap is narrowed significantly.

The discrepancy between sticker and net prices is one of the major reasons why students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups and lower-income students get diverted to the less selective colleges that they presume are more affordable.<sup>70</sup> High sticker prices deter some students from applying altogether.<sup>71</sup> Students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, need accurate information about what they can actually expect to pay earlier in the process to make informed decisions about which college is the best fit, both academically and financially.

Furthermore, current aid incentives disadvantage lower-income students at some institutions during the admissions process. Due to shrinking student populations, colleges are increasingly competing for the most academically qualified students. To recruit these students, some colleges are willing to channel more merit aid toward them at the expense of covering the financial need of lower-income students. As a result, at some institutions, costs have actually been rising more for lower-income students than for their higher-income peers over the past decade.<sup>72</sup>

With the collective student loan debt burden at \$1.8 trillion and counting,<sup>73</sup> college costs have become a significant burden for many people of all ages—although average student loan indebtedness is higher for lower-income and underrepresented minority students.<sup>74</sup> A 2023 Gallup and Lumina Foundation study found that financial pressures are among the top reasons why young adults opt to not enroll in college: among 18-to-24-year-olds who have not enrolled in college or a certificate program, 81 percent cite tuition or credential costs and 69 percent cite the need to work.<sup>75</sup> Even when students are enrolled in college, expenses are a barrier. The same Gallup/Lumina survey found that cost is one of the top three reasons why students consider dropping out, along with emotional stress and mental health.<sup>76</sup>

70 Levine et al., "Do College Applicants Respond to Changes in Sticker Prices Even When They Don't Matter?," 2023.

71 Sallie Mae, *College Confidence*, 2022.

72 Marcus and Khan, "Why Are Prices Rising More for Lower-Income College Students Than Their Higher-Income Peers?," 2023.

73 Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve System, *Student Loans Owned and Securitized (SLOAS)*, 2023.

74 Carnevale et al., *The Uncertain Pathway from Youth to a Good Job*, 2022.

75 Gallup and Lumina Foundation, *Stressed Out and Stopping Out*, 2023.

76 Gallup and Lumina Foundation, *Stressed Out and Stopping Out*, 2023.

High sticker prices may lead lower-income, academically qualified prospective students to assume that elite private institutions are out of their reach, pushing them to apply to less competitive schools—if they apply at all.



# Part IV. Policy and Practice Aimed At Addressing Inequity in Higher Education Will Require Systemic Change across Our Educational System as a Whole.

**T**he end of race-conscious affirmative action has rightfully drawn attention to equity issues at the nation's most selective colleges and universities. But in reality, the institutions affected by the *SFFA* ruling educate just a tiny fraction of the broader postsecondary student population. The vast majority of students—including a majority of Black/African Americans and Hispanic/Latino students—attend open-access colleges and universities. While broadening equitable access to the most selective colleges and universities is a vitally important goal, our focus must extend beyond the tiny slice of schools at the very top. Improving outcomes at open-access institutions could have a life-changing impact on a much larger number of students, and society at large.

**IMPROVING OUTCOMES AT OPEN-ACCESS INSTITUTIONS COULD HAVE A LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT ON A MUCH LARGER NUMBER OF STUDENTS, AND SOCIETY AT LARGE.**

Addressing polarization across the higher education system, and the resulting disparities in outcomes, will require an all-one-system approach. It is no longer enough to simply support students during the transition from high school to the postsecondary system. Instead, students must be supported from K-12 to career. In such a system, the current silos dividing high school from college, and both from the workforce, would be broken down. Preschools, elementary and secondary schools, community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, employers, and federal and state government all have a role to play in creating an integrated system that would ease the transition from K-12 to a good job.

More must also be done to make clear the return on investment associated with postsecondary education. A high school diploma is no longer a guarantee of financial stability, meaning that for the best chance of success, students need a college credential or postsecondary training. However, students will be even worse off if they are saddled with student loan debt that far exceeds the expected earnings associated with the degree they are pursuing.

College pricing is often opaque and confusing. Greater transparency is an essential component of creating a more equitable postsecondary system: Prospective students should not only have easy access to information regarding outcomes, they should also receive warnings before using federal aid to attend programs that lead to high debt and low expected earnings. These safeguards, in combination with

other regulatory measures,<sup>77</sup> will protect students from enrolling in programs and institutions that don't provide adequate value for their money.<sup>78</sup>

**The K-12 system must become better integrated with the postsecondary system.**

Success in high school and beyond depends on a strong academic foundation beginning with preschool and continuing through elementary and middle school. Improving outcomes throughout K-12 will require increasing investment in students who need it most, an investment that must begin even before kindergarten by ensuring access to high-quality pre-kindergarten for all students. Need-based funding for programs that provide targeted interventions and wraparound supports for students and their families throughout the K-12 system will be vital to decreasing opportunity gaps by race/ethnicity and class. Additionally, an equitable K-12 system will require expanding investment in the teacher workforce. States will need to address low teacher pay and prioritize recruiting a teacher workforce that better reflects the diversity of their student bodies, particularly in high-need schools.

Beyond improved academics and more equitable funding, this new system should require comprehensive, wraparound support services throughout K-12 that follows students through to a two- or four-year degree, or some form of postsecondary training.<sup>79</sup> The ultimate goal of such a system would be to bridge the gap between high school and college, with the aim of helping more students leave high school with a credential or some college credits under their belt.

We already have some good models for what this might look like at the high school level. Dual enrollment programs and Early College High School programs are two examples of this approach, allowing students to earn their high school diploma and simultaneously gain an associate degree or transferable college

77 US Department of Education, "Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment," 2023.

78 US Department of Education, "Fact Sheet," 2021.

79 Bowden et al., "An Economic Evaluation of the Costs and Benefits of Providing Comprehensive Supports to Students in Elementary School," 2020.

credits.<sup>80,81</sup> Research indicates that these programs lead to better academic outcomes and increased college enrollment and completion rates. Other programs, like Bottom Line Advising, have been shown to increase bachelor's degree attainment among their student population.<sup>82</sup> Bottom Line advisors support high school seniors during their college application process—assisting with college choice, financial aid forms, the application process, and the like—and continue to stay in touch with them as they progress through college.

The challenge is that programs such as Early College High School and Bottom Line Advising serve relatively small numbers of students and are expensive to administer and run. For instance, Bottom Line Advising currently serves 7,000 students in Boston, New York City, Chicago, and Ohio.<sup>83</sup> Although still small in size, these programs have been effective across multiple states and within varying student populations, suggesting that they could boost four-year degree attainment if brought to scale.<sup>84</sup>

In addition, Early College High Schools were originally designed to serve no more than 200 to 400 students. Size limitations led larger school districts to design dual enrollment programs that are more compatible with the greater numbers of students they serve.<sup>85</sup> A number of states have adopted these programs more broadly. However, the US is still far from bringing dual enrollment and college advising programs to national scale and securing funding mechanisms—state, federal, or philanthropic—for doing so.

Relatedly, a nationalized K–12 advising system would require many more counselors, pointing to yet another challenge. The current student-to-counselor ratio is 385 to 1 at public schools,<sup>86</sup> but advisor caseloads tend to be a fraction of this in successful student advising programs. For example, Bottom Line advisors generally have an average caseload of 50 to 60 students. While Bottom Line advisors are not formally integrated into the school system, and thus would not be included in the student-to-counselor ratio, these numbers serve as an indication of how many advisors per student might be needed to provide the level of high-touch advising necessary to truly move the needle on college enrollment and degree attainment.

While a two- or four-year degree generally leads to the best economic returns over a lifetime, the value of postsecondary training programs should not be overlooked. The Center's forthcoming work on high-paying middle-skills occupations also shows that across many of these jobs, employer demand exceeds the number of credentials providers are producing in aligned programs.<sup>87</sup> This indicates there is considerable untapped economic opportunity on the middle-skills pathway that would offer early-career middle-skills workers strong starting salaries and further earnings growth over time. The K–12 system also has a role to play in supporting pathways to postsecondary training. This includes coursework with a direct connection to potential careers, such as career and technical education (CTE) and work-based learning opportunities. Emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, with the aim of introducing students to possible career paths, can help reinforce the value of postsecondary education and training.

80 Barshay, "Research on Early College High Schools Indicates They May Pay for Themselves in the Long Run," 2020.

81 Fink, "What Happened to Community College Enrollment During the First Years of the Pandemic?," 2023. Dual enrollment programs are growing across states, and high school students now make up nearly one in five community college students.

82 Barr and Castleman, "The Bottom Line on College Advising," 2021.

83 Bottom Line, "Overview," 2024.

84 Barr and Castleman, "The Bottom Line on College Advising," 2021.

85 Vargas, "Early College," 2022.

86 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey," 2022–23.

87 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of high-paying middle-skills credentials-to-jobs alignment in major US metro areas using data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections, 2023; US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010–22; and US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2019–21.

## Open-access institutions would form the backbone of an improved college and career counseling system blurring the lines between high school and college.

A wraparound college and career counseling system that extends from K–12 into two- and four-year colleges would, ideally, blur the lines between high school and college, between two-year and four-year institutions, and between higher education and the workforce. At the state level, community colleges and public four-year institutions need to collaborate to ensure that students can easily transfer individual courses or full credit from an associate’s degree toward a bachelor’s degree. Open-access institutions should also make an effort to align programs with the local labor market and offer opportunities for students to connect with employers while still in school.<sup>88</sup>

Even with cleaner transitions from K–12 to career, this system will not succeed if it does not take students’ basic needs into consideration. Too many students—particularly those attending open-access institutions—struggle with significant financial needs that hinder their progress toward earning a degree. Affording the necessities of life became even more challenging in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the high inflationary environment that followed.

**TOO MANY STUDENTS—PARTICULARLY THOSE ATTENDING OPEN-ACCESS INSTITUTIONS—STRUGGLE WITH SIGNIFICANT FINANCIAL NEEDS THAT HINDER THEIR PROGRESS TOWARD EARNING A DEGREE.**

According to federal data, 38 percent of undergraduate students attending open-access institutions experienced some form of food insecurity over a 30-day period. Another 8 percent reported experiencing homelessness over the same period.<sup>89</sup> These findings build on other research that underlines the challenges students at open-access institutions face in securing their basic needs.<sup>90</sup>

To alleviate the financial burdens and obstacles that may impede students’ progress toward a degree, open-access institutions need increased state and local funding to support lower tuition costs and other wraparound support services. Many states have implemented College Promise programs and similar initiatives, offering some form of tuition-free education. While reducing the cost of tuition and fees is an important step, it is also crucial to address students’ basic needs beyond the cost of attendance. Colleges can provide various services to tackle housing and food insecurity, such as food pantries, emergency grants, food and housing assistance screening, and more.<sup>91</sup>

Evidence suggests that when they receive the right support, students can succeed. This is evidenced in programs like the City University of New York’s (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), Inside Track, One Million Degrees, Stay the Course, and Project Quest, among others.<sup>92</sup>

While much of the funding for these programs has come from states and philanthropic efforts, the federal government has mechanisms to expand support. The Biden Administration launched the College Completion Fund through the Postsecondary Student Success Grant (PSSG) program. This provides federal grant funding that is intended to support student retention, transfer, and degree completion—funds that could, in theory, be applied to programs modeled after the ASAP program at CUNY.<sup>93</sup> With an initial \$5 million in funding

88 Carnevale et al., *The Great Misalignment*, 2024 (forthcoming).

89 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 2020.

90 The Hope Center, *The Hope Center Survey 2021*, 2021; Broton and Goldrick-Rab, “Going Without,” 2018; Freudenberg et al., “College Students and SNAP,” 2019.

91 Speirs et al., “How Do US Colleges and Universities Help Students Address Basic Needs?,” 2023.

92 Dawson et al., “Why Expanded Student Supports Can Improve Community College Outcomes and Boost Skill Attainment,” 2021.

93 US Department of Education, “Postsecondary Student Success Program,” 2023; Dimino, “What If CUNY ASAP Was Replicated from Coast to Coast?,” 2021.

announced in 2022, the PSSG program was funded at \$45 million in fiscal year 2023.<sup>94</sup> While \$45 million is a drop in the bucket relative to how much it would cost to fund a nationalized ASAP program, it nevertheless represents a potential avenue for increased federal investment in student support services. Additionally, other federal grant programs like the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program aim to address the cost-of-living barriers that hinder students' progress toward a degree. While funding for these programs remains insufficient compared to the actual need, they present another opportunity for the federal government to enhance support for vital student support initiatives at the state and local levels.

### Alternatives to race-conscious admissions are limited in a post-affirmative action landscape.

A truly equitable system will require a wholesale reimagining of our existing schools and colleges. In practice, by the time students are old enough to apply for college, their futures have most likely already been decided for them, less by their academic ability and more by demography.<sup>95</sup> The narrow path to a selective college is generally made easier by being wealthy, having attended a magnet



or private high school, being a legacy applicant, or student athlete—or for the best chances of success, some combination of the four. It is at the nexus of these realities where generational advantages become baked in.

### THE END OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION WILL LIKELY MAKE IT CHALLENGING FOR SELECTIVE COLLEGES TO MAINTAIN, LET ALONE INCREASE, THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF THEIR STUDENT BODIES.

Underrepresented minoritized and lower-income students are not attending selective colleges for two key reasons. First, this student population tends not to apply—and to not enroll if admitted—to selective colleges, which is a phenomenon known as undermatching.<sup>96</sup> Second, selective college admissions rest on a series of preferences that privilege applicants with greater wealth and social capital. Despite broader societal goals of equity and inclusion, our higher education system still rewards exclusivity.

The end of affirmative action will likely make it challenging for selective colleges to maintain, let alone increase, the racial and ethnic diversity of their student bodies. States where the consideration of race/ethnicity in the admissions process was already prohibited at public selective institutions prior to 2023, such as California, Florida, and Michigan, offer insight into what may come next. For instance, following the 1992 ban on affirmative action in the University of California (UC) system, first-time enrollment among students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups dropped by 50 percent at the most selective UC campuses.<sup>97</sup> It is thought that the absence of affirmative action may dissuade some students from applying, and prior evidence indicates that racial

94 US Department of Education, "Postsecondary Student Success Program," 2023; Knott, "Funding for College-Completion Program at Risk in Federal Budget," 2023. The Biden Administration requested up to \$165 million in funding for the PSSG program in fiscal year 2024.

95 Salazar et al., *Geodemographics of Student List Purchases*, 2022.

96 Bowen et al., *Crossing the Finish Line*, 2009.

97 *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. President and Fellows of Harvard College and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. University of North Carolina, et al.*, Brief for the President and Chancellors of the University of California as *Amici Curiae* Supporting Respondents, 2022.

and ethnic diversity at state flagships may decline.<sup>98</sup> While there are race-neutral policies that can to some extent mitigate the effects of the court's decision, none will be as effective as explicitly considering race/ethnicity in the admissions process.

### **Class-conscious admissions and percent plans cannot make up for the loss of affirmative action on their own.**

In a post-affirmative action landscape, expanding the number of seats available to students of lower socioeconomic status has been proposed as a means of maintaining some semblance of racial/ethnic diversity at selective colleges. Since American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students are overrepresented among lower-income communities, class-based affirmative action could have the corollary effect of opening the doors of selective colleges to these groups. However, our research indicates that without additional interventions to holistic admissions processes, relying on SES alone is unlikely to maintain current levels of racial/ethnic representation—let alone drive greater representation.<sup>99</sup>

Our research indicates that class-conscious admissions would not lift Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino enrollments at selective colleges to the point of full approximation of their representation in the population as a whole. Second, it would result in a further drop in enrollment among American Indian/Alaska Native students, who currently make up just 0.3 percent of total enrollments across selective colleges.<sup>100</sup> Implementing class-conscious admissions

**WITHOUT ADDITIONAL INTERVENTIONS TO HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS PROCESSES, RELYING ON SES ALONE IS UNLIKELY TO MAINTAIN CURRENT LEVELS OF RACIAL REPRESENTATION—LET ALONE DRIVE GREATER REPRESENTATION.**

practices would also likely require a wholesale reimagining of current holistic admissions processes. It would necessitate the end of preferential admissions for the children and grandchildren of alumni<sup>101</sup> and student athletes. Finally, enrolling greater numbers of students who cannot pay full tuition costs would put greater financial pressure on institutions, even with federal incentives. A Brookings Institution simulation finds that selective institutions would need to nearly triple spending on financial aid to meet the needs of all the students who would be admitted under a more inclusive class-based affirmative action plan.<sup>102</sup> Conversely, in the absence of grants and lowered tuition costs, lower-income students might not be able to afford the cost of attending a pricier selective institution even if admitted.

A number of policy proposals already exist at the federal and state level to boost enrollment of students who qualify for Pell Grants. One example includes tying institutional eligibility to participate in federal student aid programs to enrolling a certain percentage of Pell Grant-eligible students.<sup>103</sup> Offering an endowment tax credit for institutions with Pell

98 Antonovics and Backes, "Were Minority Students Discouraged from Applying to California Campuses after the Affirmative Action Ban?," 2013; Liu, "How Do Affirmative Action Bans Affect the Racial Composition of Postsecondary Students in Public Institutions?," 2022; Long and Bateman, "Long-Run Changes in Underrepresentation After Affirmative Action Bans in Public Universities," 2020; Meyer, "The End of Race-Conscious Admissions," 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., v. University of North Carolina, et al.* Brief for the University of Michigan as *Amicus Curiae* in Support of Respondents, 2022.

99 Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023.

100 Carnevale et al., *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*, 2023. The analysis in *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action* pertains to the colleges in the top two tiers of selectivity as determined by Barron's.

101 Since the Supreme Court decision, legacy admissions practices have come under new scrutiny, with individual institutions announcing that they would end them, and some states either outright banning or mulling a ban on such practices at public institutions.

102 Levine and Reber, *Can Colleges Afford Class-Based Affirmative Action?*, 2023.

103 Carnevale and Van Der Werf, *The 20% Solution*, 2017. The enrollment shares of students who have received Pell Grants average 24 percent across all 498 selective colleges. However, Pell Grant enrollment shares vary across institutions. At the most selective colleges, Pell Grant recipients make up 17 percent of enrollments on average.

shares above a certain threshold or expanding the existing “need-blind” antitrust exemption to permit a broader set of institutions to coordinate on financial aid and admissions are among other proposals.<sup>104</sup> Other efforts are underway to increase the presence of lower-SES students in selective colleges with high graduation rates. For example, The American Talent Initiative, aims to attract, enroll, and graduate an additional 50,000 Pell Grant students at 341 colleges and universities with at least a 70 percent six-year graduation rate by 2025.<sup>105</sup>

So-called percentage plans, which guarantee admission to public universities for the top graduates of every high school in a state, are another avenue to partially remedy the loss of racial/ethnic diversity that may occur as a result of the *SFFA* ban on race-conscious admissions. Percentage plans have already been implemented in California, Florida, and Texas. Such models seek to capitalize on geographic diversity by granting automatic admissions to the states’ public universities to the top 10 percent of each graduating high school class.<sup>106</sup> However, percentage plans have been shown to have a relatively muted impact on racial/ethnic diversity. Studies in Texas suggest that increases in minoritized student enrollments were a reflection of changing demographics within the state, not the efficacy of the plans.<sup>107</sup>

### Greater transparency and outreach would help break down misperceptions about cost.

Another barrier to expanding college admissions to greater numbers of lower-income and underrepresented minoritized student groups is perceptions about the cost of college. One of the reasons why lower-income

**STUDENTS DO NOT KNOW HOW MUCH THEY WILL BE EXPECTED TO PAY OUT OF POCKET UNTIL AFTER THEY HAVE APPLIED, BEEN ACCEPTED, AND RECEIVED A FINANCIAL AID OFFER.**

students do not apply to selective colleges is because they believe it is out of their reach financially.<sup>108</sup> But this is not necessarily the case: At some of the most selective schools, lower-income students end up paying far less than the sticker price once student aid is factored in.<sup>109</sup> Greater upfront transparency about college costs during the application process could encourage more low-income students to apply—the available evidence suggests that students value financial certainty when applying to college.<sup>110</sup>

As the current system is designed, students do not know how much they will be expected to pay out of pocket until after they have applied, been accepted, and received a financial aid offer. Institutions can and should take additional steps to directly reach out to lower-income students and those lacking social capital, such as through targeted mailing campaigns,<sup>111</sup> direct admissions processes,<sup>112</sup> and clear messaging about College Promise or other free tuition programs.<sup>113</sup> Waiting until acceptance letters have gone out to reveal how much aid students will receive means that some academically qualified students will likely opt out of applying altogether.

The lack of transparency in college pricing is a longstanding issue. Among other initiatives, earlier congressional efforts to address this via the 2008

104 Pisacreta et al., *Federal Policies for Increasing Socioeconomic Diversity at Selective Colleges and Universities*, 2021.

105 American Talent Initiative, “What We Do,” 2024.

106 The percentage admitted can vary. For instance, the University of Texas at Austin, the state’s flagship institution, currently automatically admits the top 6 percent of the graduating class from all public high schools in the state. The University of Texas at Austin, “Top 10 Percent Law,” 2023.

107 Flores and Horn, *Texas Top Ten Percent Plan*, 2016; Harris and Tienda, “Hispanics in Higher Education and the Texas Top Ten Percent Law,” 2012.

108 Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs,’” 2013.

109 Levine, *A Problem of Fit*, 2022.

110 Dynarski et al., “Closing the Gap,” 2021; Burland et al., “The Power of Certainty,” 2023.

111 Busta, “How U of Michigan Used Targeted Outreach to Recruit More Low-Income Students,” 2018.

112 Hughes, “Automatic College Admissions Can Be a Boon to Students and Schools Alike,” 2022.

113 Burland et al., “The Power of Certainty,” 2023; Kelchen, *A Review of College Promise Programs*, 2017.

reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act required institutions to maintain a “net price calculator” on their websites, which would provide potential students with individualized estimates of costs. Colleges were also required to provide a “multi-year tuition calculator,” which would estimate costs for the duration of a given degree. These efforts met with mixed success. For instance, the net price calculators have been shown to have many limitations. Many colleges do not include all costs; use outdated data; fail to distinguish between loans, grants, and scholarships; and do not specify to whom the estimates apply.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, discrepancies between estimated awards and actual prices can range from \$5,700 to \$11,000, depending on institutional type, affecting students’ financial planning.<sup>115</sup>

More recent efforts to shed light on college outcomes include the College Scorecard, first released in 2015. The College Scorecard offers insight into early career debt and earnings outcomes by institution and program. In theory, this data tool provides prospective students with a general overview of how they might fare in the labor market with a specific degree from a specific institution. In practice, there are a number of limitations to be aware of when reviewing the data. For instance, because earnings information is only based on students who received federal student aid, large numbers of students are excluded. Students who did not complete their degree are also not included in the data set. Additionally, programs with small numbers of students are excluded due to privacy concerns. This means that a large number of programs are missing, which limits evaluations of outcome by degree type and field of study in some cases.

In 2023 the Department of Education released new Gainful Employment (GE) and Financial Value Transparency (FVT) regulations.<sup>116</sup> The GE regulations require postsecondary programs to meet specific minimum standards to maintain Title IV funding

eligibility. These standards are intended to ensure that graduates are not left worse off financially than if they had not attended college at all, evaluating metrics such as debt-to-earnings and an earnings premium that compares median program completer earnings to median earnings among high school graduates working in the state where the program is offered. Certificate and for-profit programs that fail the GE measures for two consecutive years could lose access to federal financial aid. The Education Department’s FVT regulations do not impact Title IV eligibility but require programs to report this information to the Department, which will then be made available on another consumer information website. As of 2026, students enrolling in certificate and graduate degree programs with debt-to-earnings outcomes that do not meet the Education Department standards will be required to acknowledge that they are aware of this issue prior to receiving federal financial aid.

Meanwhile, the House Education and Workforce Committee is advancing its own proposed legislation—the College Cost Reduction Act<sup>117</sup>—aimed at addressing runaway college costs. Among many other measures, this bill would create a new value-added earnings metric. It also includes a risk-sharing proposal that would make colleges responsible for loans that former students fail to repay. While the means by which Democratic and Republican lawmakers intend to address costs differ, these efforts signal a growing bipartisan alignment in concern around the burden that college costs place on students, families, and taxpayers.



114 Perna et al., *Questioning the Calculations*, 2019.

115 Anthony and Page, “How Big is the Ballpark?” 2021.

116 US Department of Education, “Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment,” 2023.

117 US Congress, House, *College Cost Reduction Act*, 2024.

# Conclusion

**T**he end of affirmative action leaves us without the collective illusion that by allowing some Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and other underrepresented minority students into spaces historically dominated by white, wealthy students, we were making progress toward greater parity. Now, we will be forced to confront the system as it is, without affirmative action to reassure us that we are taking some steps forward, however slowly. Too often, whether a child attends college is determined by their socioeconomic status rather than their academic potential. As bachelor's degrees become increasingly vital for securing good jobs, education in America has become a focal point for intergenerational inequality. Children of parents with bachelor's degrees are more likely to enroll in and complete college. Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students are no longer underrepresented in the overall college population relative to their proportion of the total 18-to-24-year-old population, but they remain concentrated in open-access institutions with lower graduation rates.

There are numerous potential avenues to remedy this situation that would require attention across all levels of the educational system. Funding mechanisms at the K-12 level that disproportionately allocate resources to wealthier school districts could be restructured. Open-access institutions could receive the necessary funding to effectively support students' success. Selective colleges and universities could discontinue preferential admissions for wealthy and already socially connected students. An all-one-system approach that included all of these improvements would pave the way toward a more just society where equal opportunities would be available to all, regardless of their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or the zip code they grew up in.



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# Appendix A. Data Sources

This report relies on the following data sources in its analysis:

## **Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC)**

Data on the college-age (18-to-24-year-old) population were derived from the 2009 and 2019 CPS-ASEC, which is an annual survey conducted in March by the US Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

## **US Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)**

IPEDS collects annual data from US higher education institutions that participate in federal student financial aid programs. This data collection covers a wide variety of information, though this analysis is limited to data on institutional characteristics, enrollment, student financial aid, instructional staff, and graduation rates. Analysis is limited to degree-granting institutions.

## **NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files: 2014**

This analysis used this restricted-use data file from the National Center for Education Statistics, which contains the Barron's ranking for four-year colleges. Colleges are categorized in one of seven groups: most competitive, highly competitive, very competitive, competitive, less competitive, non-competitive, and special. Rankings in 2014 were used to define the three tiers of selectivity used throughout this report. Institutions ranked as special by Barron's were excluded from this analysis.

# Appendix B. Defining Selectivity

This analysis used Barron's selectivity index to categorize institutions as selective, middle-tier, or open-access. *The NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Files: 1972, 1982, 1992, 2004, 2008, 2014* were linked to IPEDS survey data using the unique identifier number (unit ID).

## Selective colleges

Selective colleges are defined as those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index:

- most competitive
- highly competitive
- very competitive

A total of 503 institutions fell within these categories in 2009, and 498 institutions fell within these categories in 2019.

Enrollment at institutions categorized as “most competitive” is generally limited to students with high school grade averages above a B+ who scored 655 or higher on the SAT (the median of the critical reading, math, and writing sections of the test), or 29 and above on the ACT. These students were typically in the top 10–20 percent of their high school classes. This category included institutions such as Davidson College, Harvard University, Reed College, the United States Military Academy, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

“Highly competitive” institutions typically enroll students with high school grade averages of at least a B to a B+ who were in the top 20–35 percent of their high school classes. These students typically have median SAT scores between 620 and 654 and ACT scores between 27 and 28. Institutions in this category

included American University, Clemson University, Lafayette College, Rhodes College, and the University of Michigan in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

Enrollees at “very competitive” institutions typically have high school grade averages of at least a B- and rank in the top 30–50 percent of their high school classes. Median SAT scores range from 573 to 619, and ACT scores range from 24 to 26. Auburn University, DePaul University, the Milwaukee School of Engineering, Saint Anselm College, and the University of Iowa were included in this category in 2015.<sup>3</sup>

## Middle-tier

The middle-tier in this analysis consists of institutions that are labeled as “competitive” in the Barron's selectivity index. In 2009, 638 institutions fell within this category, and 618 institutions fell within this category in 2019.

## Open-access

Institutions classified as “less competitive” or “non-competitive” in Barron's selectivity index are considered open-access. Additionally, four-year institutions that are not ranked by Barron's and two-year and less-than-four-year institutions are categorized as open-access. In 2009, 2,976 institutions fell within this category, and 2,451 institutions fell within this category in 2019.

1 Barron's Educational Series, *Profiles of American Colleges 2015, 2014*.

2 Barron's Educational Series, *Profiles of American Colleges 2015, 2014*.

3 Barron's Educational Series, *Profiles of American Colleges 2015, 2014*.

## Appendix C.

# Fall Enrollment, First-Time Degree/ Certificate-Seeking Undergraduates

TABLE C1

Fall enrollment by race/ethnicity and selectivity, 2009

2009	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black/ African American	Hispanic/ Latino	White	Two or more races	Total
SELECTIVE	4,548	63,887	43,509	51,330	431,431	3,497	598,202
MIDDLE-TIER	4,902	26,858	80,299	53,998	373,382	3,364	542,803
OPEN-ACCESS	22,577	82,715	328,713	340,975	930,275	14,507	1,719,762
TOTAL	32,027	173,460	452,521	446,303	1,735,088	21,368	2,860,767

TABLE C2

Fall enrollment by race/ethnicity and selectivity, 2019

2019	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black/ African American	Hispanic/ Latino	White	Two or more races	Total
SELECTIVE	2,196	85,879	48,955	100,863	436,350	37,492	711,735
MIDDLE-TIER	3,422	33,347	79,925	101,976	333,503	27,387	579,560
OPEN-ACCESS	12,886	73,133	225,800	432,690	590,551	57,942	1,393,002
TOTAL	18,504	192,359	354,680	635,529	1,360,404	122,821	2,684,297

TABLE C3

## Change in fall enrollment by race/ethnicity and selectivity, 2009–19

CHANGE	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black/ African American	Hispanic/ Latino	White	Two or more races*	Total
SELECTIVE	-2,352	21,992	5,446	49,533	4,919	33,995	113,533
MIDDLE-TIER	-1,480	6,489	-374	47,978	-39,879	24,023	36,757
OPEN-ACCESS	-9,691	-9,582	-102,913	91,715	-339,724	43,435	-326,760
TOTAL	-13,523	18,899	-97,841	189,226	-374,684	101,453	-176,470

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

\* The large increase in students identifying as “two or more races” from 2009–10 to 2019–20 is in part due to the new race/ethnicity categorization that was introduced in 2008–09. Institutions had the option to use either the old or new race/ethnicity categories until 2010–11, when they were required to report using the new categories.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Enrollment totals exclude nonresident alien students and students whose race/ethnicity is unknown. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

IPEDS racial and ethnic categorizations changed slightly from 2009–10 to 2019–20. In particular, the 2009–10 data set does not separate Asian American students from Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students. The 2019–20 data set breaks these groups apart, but in order to make comparisons across years we combined the Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific

Islander students in 2019–20 as well. **Table C4** displays enrollment by selectivity separately for Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students in 2019–20. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students account for a small share of the combined Asian American/Pacific Islander group, about 5 percent, but exhibit very different enrollment patterns.

TABLE C4

#### Fall enrollment for Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students by selectivity, 2019–20

2019–20	Asian American	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
SELECTIVE	84,944	935	85,879
MIDDLE-TIER	32,012	1,335	33,347
OPEN-ACCESS	66,481	6,652	73,133
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>183,437</b>	<b>8,922</b>	<b>192,359</b>

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

In 2019–20, only 10 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students attended selective institutions, while 75 percent attended open-access institutions. This enrollment distribution is in stark contrast to the 46 percent of Asian American students who attended selective institutions.

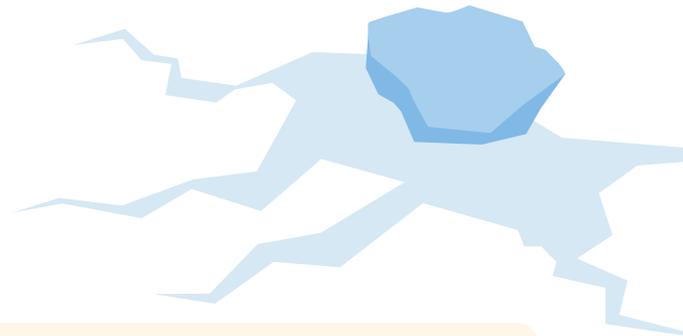
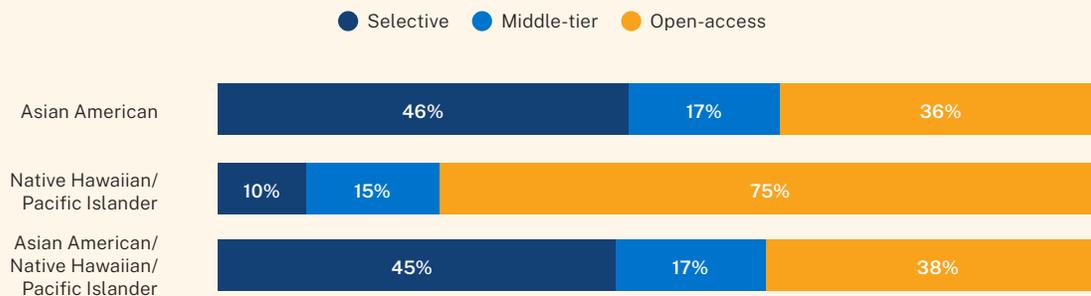


FIGURE C1

**Almost half of Asian American students attended selective institutions in 2019–20, compared to only 10 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2009–10 and 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: The data reflect fall enrollment for first-time undergraduate degree/certificate-seeking students in the designated academic years. Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of colleges in Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.

# Appendix D.

## College Endowments

TABLE D1

Endowments by detailed selectivity, 2019–20 (numbers in thousands)

	All Selective	Most Competitive	Highly Competitive	Very Competitive	Open-Access
MEDIAN	\$195,429	\$1,417,473	\$352,206	\$110,406	\$7
MINIMUM	\$0	\$5,800	\$0	\$0	\$0
MAXIMUM	\$40,929,702	\$40,929,702	\$12,273,834	\$12,632,093	\$1,270,123
MEAN	\$1,043,668	\$3,890,542	\$798,037	\$266,278	\$9,738

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019–20; and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files, 2014.

Note: Selective institutions are those in the top three tiers of Barron's selectivity index (2014). Open-access institutions are defined as those in the fifth and sixth tiers of Barron's selectivity index, as well as four-year institutions not classified by Barron's and all less-than-four-year institutions.



An all-one-system approach is required if we hope to pave the way toward a more just society where equal opportunities are available to all, regardless of their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or the zip code they grew up in.



# Progress Interrupted: Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions Prior to the End of Race-Conscious Affirmative Action

can be accessed online at  
[cew.georgetown.edu/progressinterrupted](http://cew.georgetown.edu/progressinterrupted)

 [instagram.com/GeorgetownCEW](https://www.instagram.com/GeorgetownCEW)

 [@GeorgetownCEW](https://twitter.com/GeorgetownCEW)

 [linkedin.com/company/GeorgetownCEW](https://www.linkedin.com/company/GeorgetownCEW)

[cew.georgetown.edu](http://cew.georgetown.edu)