

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

The Postsecondary Education Student Population

Updated February 9, 2005

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Summary

In the fall of 2000, 15.3 million students were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges and universities; 12.4 million enrolled as undergraduates. The composition of the student population, the rates at which different groups in the general population participate in postsecondary education, and potential future changes in the enrolled population are all likely to be of particular interest to the U.S. Congress as it considers the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

The population of currently enrolled undergraduates is primarily composed of white, non-Hispanic young adults — two-thirds are white, non-Hispanic and nearly three-quarters are between 15 and 25. Nonetheless, minority students constitute a sizeable portion of postsecondary enrollment, particularly among older students — 3-in-10 undergraduates between 15 and 24 and nearly 4-in-10 undergraduates over 24 are either black, Hispanic or Asian. Non-traditional students (i.e., those older than 24 or enrolling on less than a full-time basis) also make up a large portion of the population — nearly 4 out of every 10 enrolled undergraduates.

With respect to postsecondary participation rates in the general population, race, ethnicity, and family income are clearly associated with undergraduate enrollment. Among all high school graduates between 15 and 24, whites and Asians are more likely to be enrolled in college than are blacks and Hispanics (41% and 51%, compared to 37% and 34%, respectively). Similarly, high-income individuals in this age group participate at higher rates than do low-income individuals. The enrollment rate among all high school graduates with family income of \$75,000 or more is 58%; compared to 34% among all high school graduates with family income less than \$25,000.

Since the inception of the HEA, the female share of total postsecondary enrollment (including graduate and first professional students) has grown markedly. Women made up 38% of enrollment in 1965; compared to 55% in 2000. Even with large racial and ethnic discrepancies in current participation rates, there has been a general increase in minority enrollment in recent decades. The percent of postsecondary students identified as black increased from 6% in 1965 to 14% in 2000. Hispanic enrollment increased from less than 1% in 1975 to more than 9% in 2000.

What are some of the implications of these findings for the HEA? The continued positive association between postsecondary participation and income, and lower participation rates among blacks and Hispanics may spark debate about the investment in the HEA's need-based student aid. These findings may also focus attention on the HEA programs that provide support services to improve disadvantaged secondary school students' movement through the educational pipeline. Further, the finding that non-traditional students make up a substantial portion of postsecondary education enrollment suggests that concerns about the ability of HEA student aid programs to serve these students are unlikely to abate in the near future.

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The Postsecondary Education Student Population

Introduction

In the fall of 2000, 15.3 million students were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges and universities.¹ Thirty-five years earlier, in the fall of 1965, the year when the Higher Education Act (HEA) was enacted, there were just 5.7 million students. The composition of the current student population, the rates at which different groups in the general population enroll in postsecondary education, and potential future changes in the enrolled population are all issues relevant to federal higher education policymaking. These data are likely to be of particular interest to the U.S. Congress as it considers the reauthorization of the HEA.²

This report will focus mainly on the 12.4 million enrolled as undergraduates³ in the fall of 2000, describing key attributes of this currently enrolled population. It will also analyze current rates at which different socioeconomic groups participate in postsecondary education. Finally, the report will consider the future composition of the postsecondary student population. These topics provide an important context for consideration and development of federal higher education policy. This report will not be updated.

HEA Policymaking. The core of the HEA is its array of programs providing financial assistance to students, particularly those with financial need. Need-based aid is a key element in the long-standing HEA mission to expand access to postsecondary education. Partly as a result of this mission, the topics analyzed in this report raise issues that are fundamentally linked to HEA policy. For example, the

¹ Data are from the Bureau of the Census' Current Population Survey (CPS) for October, 2000. CPS postsecondary education enrollment statistics are a snapshot of persons enrolled at that point in time. Further, the student population analyzed in this report includes only individuals attending courses that are part of a degree-granting program (associate's degree or higher). As a result, 3.4 million other individuals taking business, vocational, technical, secretarial, trade, or correspondence courses are not part of this analysis.

² For background on reauthorization of the HEA, see CRS Issue Brief IB10097, *The Higher Education Act: Reauthorization Status and Issues*, by James Stedman.

³ In the CPS, students are classified by year of postsecondary education in which they are attending (academic year, not calendar year). Undergraduates are those identified in CPS data as attending their first through fourth year of postsecondary education. As a result, no matter how many calendar years a student has been enrolled, the year in school reflects his or her status academically (e.g., a student who is in his or her fifth calendar year but who has junior status is identified in these data as being a third year student). Those in their fifth year or higher year of postsecondary education are considered graduate students.

sheer number of individuals enrolled in postsecondary education is important because policy changes may affect a large number of individuals. Further, costs to the federal government of policies seeking to extend assistance or services across a significant portion of this enrollment are likely to be high simply because of its size. Diversity of this student population has important implications for HEA programs. Eligibility for current HEA need-based student aid programs is directly affected by such factors as students' income and whether they are enrolled full-time or part-time. In addition, the success or failure of the federal multi-billion dollar investment in HEA student aid programs has often been measured in terms of evidence of change in the access to postsecondary education of different socioeconomic groups.

Data Source. This analysis of the current student population, higher education participation rates, and future enrollment is based on data made available by the U.S. Census Bureau. The first two sections, which focus on the enrolled student body and on participation rates, are based on CPS data collected during October 2000.⁴ The concluding section relies on historical October CPS data as well as past population estimates and future population projections made by the Census Bureau.⁵

Current Postsecondary Education Students

This section paints a portrait of current *undergraduate* students in terms of age, gender, race and ethnicity, family income, enrollment status (full-time or less than full-time), institutional level (4-year or 2-year), and institutional control (public or private).⁶ It also considers the relative balance between *traditional* and *non-traditional* students at the undergraduate level.

Demographics of Enrolled Undergraduates. The postsecondary enrolled population is predominantly white, non-Hispanic, under age 25, and slightly more female than male. Also, these students are from families with incomes above the U.S. average.

Table 1 presents data on the enrolled undergraduate population in the fall of 2000.⁷ It focuses on how various characteristics of the enrolled population differ across broad age groups — those 15 to 24 years of age, and those 25 and older. The undergraduate population is relatively young; its *median* age is 21 years.⁸ However,

⁴ The CPS is a monthly survey of approximately 50,000 households. The October iteration of the survey asks respondents supplemental questions about their education.

⁵ The intergroup comparisons made in this report have been tested using CPS guidelines and were found to be statistically significant unless noted otherwise.

⁶ The CPS data do not distinguish between enrollment in private nonprofit institutions and enrollment in private for-profit (proprietary) institutions.

⁷ Generally, the youngest age cohorts considered here begin with age 15, often the earliest age at which census data indicate individuals are estimated to be enrolled in postsecondary education.

⁸ This is the age that divides the undergraduate population in half.

the *mean* undergraduate age is 24⁹ — indicating that a portion of this population is significantly older than the median. As shown in **Table 1**, 72% of undergraduates are between 15 and 24, while over one-fourth (28%) are 25 or older. Looking more closely at the 25 and above population reveals that 16% of undergraduates are between 25 and 34, 8% between 35 and 44, and 4% 45 or older (data not included in **Table 1**).

Table 1. Characteristics of Enrolled Undergraduates by Age, Fall 2000

Characteristic	15 Years old and older	15 to 24 Years old	25 Years old and older
<i>Undergraduate population</i>	100%	72%	28%
Female	56%	54%	60%
White, non-Hispanic	69%	71%	63%
Black, non-Hispanic	15%	13%	19%
Hispanic	10%	10%	11%
Asian, non-Hispanic	7%	7%	7%
<i>Family income</i>			
Less than \$25,000	23%	22%	26%
\$25,000-49,999	27%	24%	34%
\$50,000-\$74,999	21%	21%	22%
\$75,000 or more	29%	33%	18%
<i>Median family income</i>	\$45,000	\$55,000	\$45,000
4-Year	69%	72%	59%
Full-time	72%	83%	40%
Public	81%	80%	84%

Source: October 2000 Current Population Survey.

⁹ This is the average age of the undergraduate population.

The overall undergraduate population is 56% female. This female majority increases markedly with age. Among those between 15 and 24, the proportion female is 54%; among those 25 and older, 60% are female. Among those over 34, the female share rises to 65% (data not shown in **Table 1**). It appears that women have a greater propensity than men to pursue postsecondary education at later stages of the life course.¹⁰

The white, non-Hispanic student population accounts for 69% of all undergraduates, compared to 15% for black, non-Hispanics, 10% for Hispanics, and 7% for Asian, non-Hispanics.¹¹ Minority representation is higher among older undergraduates. Of undergraduates 15 to 24 years of age, 29% are minority; of undergraduates over the age of 24, 37% are minority.

The best available measure in the October CPS of the economic status of postsecondary students is family income. That is, the combined income from all sources for the student and all of those identified by the survey as being in the student's family. The students' family includes all relatives by birth, marriage, or adoption that reside in the family household as well as the student (regardless of whether he or she lives elsewhere for part of the calendar year).¹²

It is important to note that the ability of CPS sampling methodology to link students living away from home back to their families is limited in certain cases. Family income is the sum of income for all household members who are related to the "reference person," or RP, (i.e., the person who owns or rents the household sampled in the survey — and not necessarily the survey respondent). Among the undergraduates identified in October 2000, 31% were the RP, 60% were related to the RP (mostly as children and spouses), and 9% were not related to the RP (mostly partners and roommates). Since members of the last group are not related to the RP, family income is not available and they are not included in the income figures reported here. Among those who were the RP, about half (14% of the entire sample of undergraduates) had no relatives in the household. Although family income is reported for these individuals (it is equal to their personal income), whether they may have access to the income of other possible family members is unknown.

Without specific information about the *actual* funds transferred between family members, the CPS measures students' *potential* access to financial resources through the amount of family income and the family relationships identified by the survey. For the large majority of cases, family income as measured by the CPS serves as a reasonable indicator of this *potential*. In addition, distinct from issues of actual versus potential resources, family income is useful as a measure of students'

¹⁰ At nearly every age level above 24 years old, the participation rate of females is higher than that of males. Participation rates are explored more fully in a subsequent section of this report.

¹¹ These groups are subsequently referred to in this report as whites, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. Following U.S. Census Bureau definitions, Hispanics can be of any race.

¹² Students away at college "are still classified as household members even though they are not present in the household during the survey week." See U.S. Census Bureau. *Technical Paper 63RV: Current Population Survey — Design and Methodology*, March 2002.

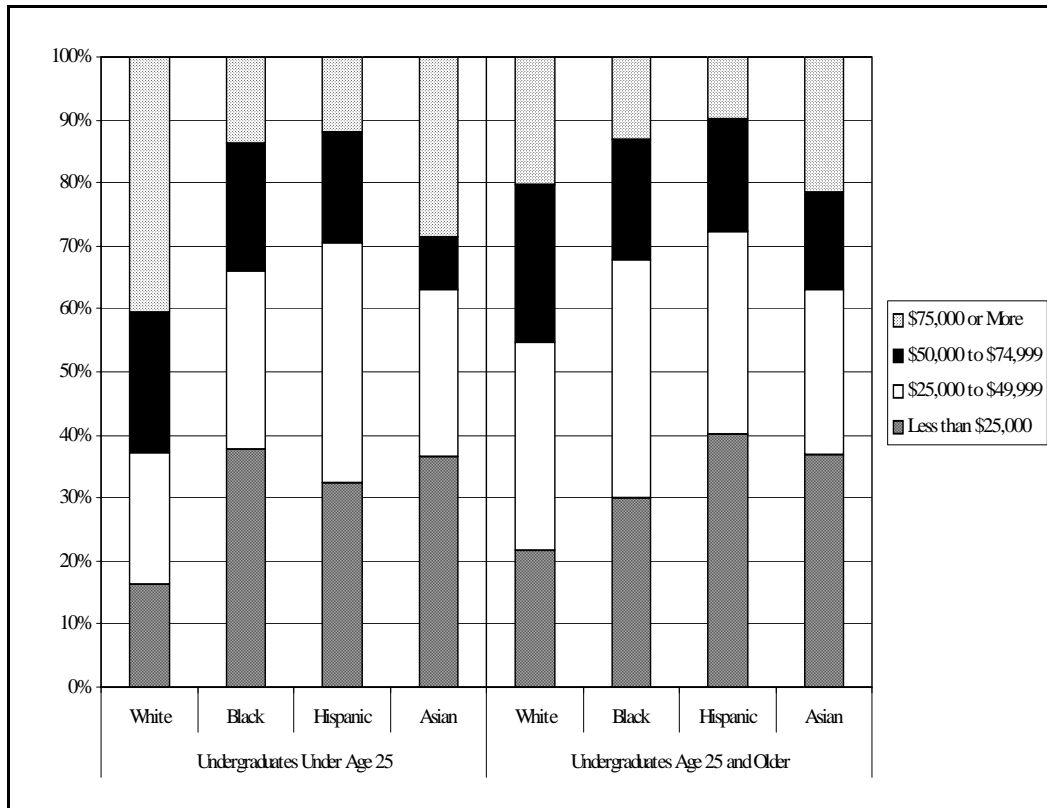
socioeconomic background. This use of family income is consistent with the following section of this report which presents data on postsecondary participation rates of individuals in the general population coming from different family income levels.¹³

Just over half of those enrolled in postsecondary education are members of families with incomes under \$50,000 — nearly one-quarter were under \$25,000 and well over one-quarter are over \$75,000.¹⁴ Median family income for students age 15 to 24 is \$55,000, compared to \$45,000 for those over 24. **Figure 1** presents family income for these two age groups by racial and ethnic background.

¹³ The financial relationship between a student and his or her parents is measured differently under the system established by the HEA for determining a student's financial need for federal student aid programs. It defines a student's financial connection to his or her parents' income and assets in terms of several specific characteristics. A student is considered financially independent from his or her parents if any of the following apply: the student is 24 years old or older by December 31st of the award year, is an orphan or ward of the court (or was until age 18), is a veteran of the Armed Forces, is a graduate or professional student, is married, or has dependents other than a spouse. Any student not meeting one of these conditions is considered financially dependent on his or her parents. None of these conditions measures whether a student is actually financially dependent or independent of parents. For example, for financial aid purposes, a student who has a dependent child and who resides with his or her parents is treated as financially independent, even if the parents contribute substantial resources to the student.

¹⁴ Family income data based on the federal need analysis definition of independence are gathered periodically through the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). This survey of a nationally representative sample of students was most recently conducted for 1999-2000; it gathers data on student and family financing of postsecondary education, as well as general characteristics of the enrolled population. CRS estimates using the 1999-2000 NPSAS show a somewhat higher percentage of undergraduates in the under \$25,000 category, and a complementary lower percentage in the \$75,000 and over category. This is likely a function, at least in part, of the attribution of income to students in NPSAS based on federal need analysis dependency rules rather than actual or potential access to the income of other family members.

Figure 1. Distribution of Undergraduate Racial and Ethnic Groups by Family Income, Fall 2000



Looking at those under 25 (the four bars on the left side of the figure), white students clearly have access to greater financial resources through their families than do students of other groups. Over 40% of whites are members of families with an income of at least \$75,000, compared to 14% of blacks, 12% of Hispanics, and 29% of Asians. Conversely, 16% of white students have family income below \$25,000, compared to 38% of blacks, 32% of Hispanics, and 37% of Asians. These racial and ethnic disparities decline among students 25 and over; however, older minority students are still more likely to be members of families with less income than are white students.

Characteristics of Schools Which Students Attend. According to the October 2000 CPS, 69% of undergraduate students enrolled in the fall of 2000 attended 4-year institutions and 81% attended public schools.¹⁵ Students 15 to 24 are more likely than older students to attend 4-year schools. Women, blacks and Hispanics are more likely than men and other racial/ethnic groups to attend 2-year schools. Median family income of those attending 4-year schools is approximately

¹⁵ NPSAS estimates of the distribution of students across institutional sectors differ from those reported here from the CPS. For example, NPSAS shows a higher percentage of students enrolled in 2-year institutions than does the CPS (at least 42% compared to an estimated 31%). Among the differences between the two surveys contributing to this disparity in estimates is that the NPSAS data are based on enrollments across an entire academic year, while the CPS data reflect enrollments at a point in time (October).

\$10,000 higher than for those attending 2-year schools — \$55,000 and \$45,000 respectively.

In terms of public versus private schools, no significant disparities were found in the CPS data with respect to age, gender or race. However, Hispanics are much less likely than non-Hispanics to attend private schools. In addition, those who are attending private schools have higher family incomes than those attending public schools — \$55,000 and \$45,000 respectively.

Traditional versus Non-Traditional Undergraduates. There is concern among some that HEA student aid programs are designed for the so-called *traditional* student and may not adequately serve the *non-traditional* postsecondary education student.¹⁶ This portion of the report explores the extent to which the undergraduate population is non-traditional.

The *non-traditional* label is imprecise and much debated.¹⁷ There is no consensus on the characteristics that distinguish traditional from non-traditional students. Underlying this issue is an understanding that today’s student population includes a significant number of individuals who differ from the majority of students in the mid-1960s through early 1970s when much of the present HEA student aid framework was constructed.

The present analysis focuses on two characteristics to distinguish the traditional from the non-traditional undergraduate populations — age and enrollment status. These two characteristics are among those most commonly used to make this distinction. Further, they are likely to be associated with additional factors that others have used to identify the non-traditional student, such as working full-time while going to school and having dependents.¹⁸ With regard to age, for purposes of

¹⁶ For example, Roberts T. Jones, president of the National Alliance of Business, is reported by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (New Panel Opens ‘National Dialogue’ on Federal Student-Aid Policy, February 28, 2002) to have stated that student aid programs do not address well the needs of nontraditional students “cycling in and out” of postsecondary education.

¹⁷ See, for example, the discussion of who is a non-traditional student in: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *Nontraditional Undergraduates: Trends in Enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment among 1989-1990 Beginning Postsecondary Students*. NCES 97-578, November 1996 (Hereafter cited as NCES, *Nontraditional Undergraduates*).

¹⁸ The NCES study on *Nontraditional Undergraduates* identified seven different characteristics that it associated with a non-traditional status for undergraduates: being financially independent (parental income and assets are **not** considered for federal need analysis purposes), having delayed entry into postsecondary education, enrolling part-time, working full-time, having dependents, being a single parent, or completing high school by obtaining a GED or other certificate. For each of the 3 years analyzed by that study, a distinct majority of all undergraduates were considered to be at least “minimally nontraditional” (having at least one of the non-traditional characteristics). The percentage ranged from approximately 64.6% in fall 1986 to 69.6% in fall 1992. The three most predominant factors were age, enrollment status, and financial dependency. The last factor (continued...)

this analysis, we analyze the portions of the undergraduate population that are under and over the age of 25. The enrollment status is divided into student enrolled on a full-time basis (enrolled for 12 or more credit hours) and those enrolled less than a full-time.

As noted above, according to October 2000 CPS data, 72% of all undergraduates are under the age of 25; 28% are 25 or older. Undergraduates enrolled on a full-time basis make up 72% of today's undergraduates, while 28% are part-time. If the traditional student is defined as one under 25 years of age enrolled on a full-time basis, 61% of all of today's undergraduates meet that definition, leaving the remaining 39% of undergraduates with a non-traditional status.

Comparing the characteristics of the traditional and non-traditional students, we find that non-traditional students are more likely to be enrolled in 2-year, public institutions; they are also more likely to be minority and to have relatively low income. Of traditional students, 78% attend 4-year institutions and 78% attend public schools; in contrast, for non-traditional students, these percentages are 57% and 86% respectively. Non-traditional students are more likely to be minority than are traditional students (36% compared to 28%). Blacks account for much of this difference — representing 13% of traditional students and 18% of non-traditional students. The median family income of traditional students is \$55,000 — compared to \$45,000 for non-traditional students. Non-traditional students' family income does not vary by 2-year/4-year or public/private school status. However, among traditional students, family income varies from a median of \$67,500 for those attending all private institutions to \$55,000 for those in public, 4-year schools and \$45,000 for those in all 2-year schools.

Undergraduate Participation Rates

The above data on currently enrolled students are limited in what they can say about the important issue of educational access. The relevant question to ask in terms of access is not, what *proportion of enrolled students* come from various population sub-groups (the question addressed above), but rather, what *proportion of various sub-groups* are enrolling in postsecondary education. To this end, the analysis now turns to rates of participation in higher education among various socioeconomic sectors of the U.S. population.

First, it is important to note that two factors have a very large impact on participation rates: age and high school completion.¹⁹ Among all individuals in the U.S. 15 years old and older, 6% were enrolled as undergraduates in the fall of 2000,

¹⁸ (...continued)

— financial dependency — may be a somewhat problematic distinguishing characteristic since the definition of independent financial status for federal student aid purposes has changed over time, leaving some question as to its utility as a measure for these purposes.

¹⁹ High school completion is defined in this analysis as either the granting of a diploma or the completion of a General Educational Development (GED) test. Delineating the impact of differences in the participation rates of diploma recipients and GED completers is beyond the scope of the present analysis.

compared to 23% of those between 15 and 24 and 2% of those over age 24. Similarly, among all high school graduates 15 years old and older,²⁰ 7% were enrolled as undergraduates in the fall of 2000, compared to 40% of high school graduates between 15 and 24, and 2% of high school graduates over age 24. Thus, the following presentation of participation rates by population sub-group will be made while controlling for age and high school completion.

Undergraduate Participation Rates Among Individuals Age 15 to 24.

Table 2 presents the rates of undergraduate postsecondary education participation among various sub-group populations by age and high school completion. Among all those in the general population age 15 to 24, the participation rate for females is 25% and 21% for males — that is, 1 in 4 females and just over 1 in 5 males in this age group are in postsecondary education. Among high school graduates 15-24, the percentage point difference in postsecondary education attendance is roughly the same as it is for everyone in that age group — 42% for females and 39% for males.

²⁰ Although many of those in the 15 to 18 age group are still in high school, the CPS data identifies enough individuals in this age group who are enrolled in postsecondary education to warrant the use of a lower age bound of 15 in this analysis.

Table 2. Higher Education Undergraduate Participation Rates, Fall 2000

Characteristic	15 to 24 Years old		25 to 34 Years old		35 Years old and older	
	Total	High school graduates	Total	High school graduates	Total	High school graduates
All Persons	23%	40%	5%	6%	1%	1%
Female	25%	42%	6%	7%	1%	1%
Male	21%	39%	5%	6%	1%	1%
White, non-Hispanic	25%	41%	5%	5%	1%	1%
Black, non-Hispanic	20%	37%	9%	10%	2%	2%
Hispanic	15%	34%	4%	7%	1%	2%
Asian, non-Hispanic	32%	51%	7%	8%	2%	2%
Family Income						
Less than \$25,000	17%	34%	6%	9%	1%	2%
\$25,000-49,999	19%	33%	5%	6%	1%	2%
\$50,000-\$74,999	27%	48%	5%	5%	1%	2%
\$75,000 or More	34%	58%	4%	4%	1%	1%

Source: October 2000 Current Population Survey.

Whites age 15 to 24 have a higher participation rate than blacks and Hispanics of the same age and a lower participation rate than Asians of that age. This is true whether or not the population has graduated from high school. These patterns in participation rates are depicted in **Figure 2** below.

Figure 2. Undergraduate Participation Rates by Racial and Ethnic Group, Fall 2000

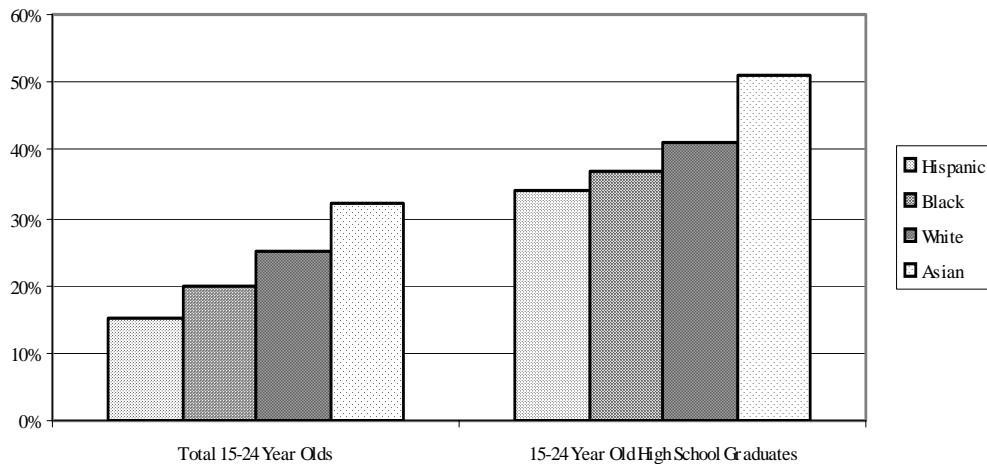
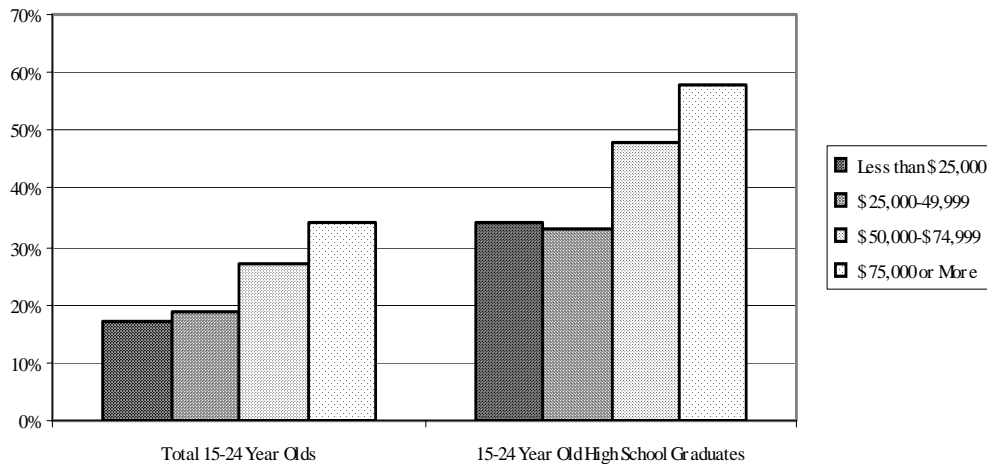


Figure 2 shows that each group's participation rate in postsecondary education increases substantially when the focus is on the high school graduate population. Blacks and Hispanics show the greatest percentage increase in their participation rates. The black rate nearly doubles (from 20% to 37%) while the Hispanic rate more than doubles (from 15% to 34%). Nevertheless, there remain gaps in participation rates for high school graduates across racial and ethnic groups.

As shown in **Figure 3** below, postsecondary education participation for 15 to 24 year olds grows as family income increases. At the highest income, the enrollment rate is substantially greater than the rate for the low income portion of the population. The enrollment rate of individuals with family income of \$75,000 or more is twice that of those with less than \$25,000 (34% compared to 17%). In contrast, when the enrollment rate of high school graduates is compared, the high income participation rate is 70% higher than the low income rate. Nevertheless, the percentage point difference is actually significantly greater — 24 percentage points compared to 17 percentage points.

Figure 3. Postsecondary Education Participation Rates by Family Income, Fall 2000



Undergraduate Participation Rates Among Individuals Over Age 24.

As noted earlier, the 2000 CPS data reveal that about 4 in 10 undergraduates are *non-traditional* students (i.e., over 24 or part-time). Because this is a significant proportion of the student population, it is useful to look at participation rates among those over age 24 by socioeconomic status.

A review of the right-hand columns in **Table 2** reveals that the 25 to 34 year old participation rates for high school graduates who are either female, Hispanic, or have low family income are slightly higher than the *all persons* rate. Also, larger proportions of these groups are enrolled in postsecondary education than are males, whites, or high income individuals. For example, 6% of females 25 to 34 are enrolled compared to 5% of males that age, 9% of blacks 25 to 34 are enrolled compared to 5% of whites, and 6% of 25 to 34 year olds with family income under \$25,000 are enrolled compared to 4% of those over \$75,000.

A useful way to look at the data presented in **Table 2** is to break the participation rates into two categories: (1) sub-populations that have higher rates than their comparison population²¹ *at every age*, and (2) sub-populations that have lower rates in the 15-24 age group and higher rates for those over 24. Females and Asians fit in the first category and blacks and Hispanics and lower income persons fit in the second category. Specifically, females have higher rates than males in all three age groupings and Asians have higher rates than whites in all three age groupings.

²¹ The comparison population for race and ethnicity is white; for gender, it is male; and for income, it is the \$75,000 or more category.

On the other hand, blacks had lower rates than whites in the 15 to 24 age group, but had higher rates in the 25 to 34 age group. Following a similar trend, those with low income had lower rates than those with higher income in the 15 to 24 age group, but had higher rates in the 25 to 34 age group. Finally, Hispanic high school graduates have lower rates than white high school graduates in the 15 to 24 age group, but have higher rates in the 25 to 34 age group (comparative rates in the total 25 to 34 age group differ by one percentage point).

The interpretation of the findings for the female/male comparison and the Asian/white comparison appears straight-forward, females and Asians attend postsecondary education at a higher rate regardless of their age or incidence of high school completion. However, making sense of the findings among other inter-group comparisons is more complex.

That blacks, those with below average income, and Hispanic high school graduates had higher rates in the 25 to 34 age group could mean either that these individuals take longer to complete a postsecondary education degree or that they are less likely to enter postsecondary education directly out of high school. Their lower participation rates in the 15 to 24 age group as well as the convergence of the income distributions among those over 24 in different racial/ethnic groups seen earlier in **Figure 1** gives strong support to the latter explanation. That is, upper income whites appear much more likely to start and finish school before age 24, while lower income non-whites do not follow this pattern. However, without longitudinal data or information on time taken to complete a degree, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

Future Postsecondary Education Students

Two sets of trendlines provide insight into the composition of the future postsecondary student population. The first, presented in **Figure 4**, are the historic trends in total postsecondary education enrollment among various groups. The second, presented in **Figure 5**, are the past and future growth trends for these groups in the overall population.

Figure 4 shows that the characteristics of the total postsecondary enrolled population has changed significantly since the enactment of the HEA in 1965.²² In general, postsecondary students are now more likely to be female, minority, and over 25 years of age than was true in the mid-1960s.

²² The data used for this figure are for **all individuals enrolled in postsecondary education**, regardless of the year of enrollment, not just undergraduates as is true for the previous sections of this report. Further, the enrolled population is capped at age 34 because that was the age limit for CPS data published through much of this period. **As a result, the percentages of enrollment for different groups discussed here differ from those presented earlier in this report.** The income data used are based on the number of families with at least one dependent child in postsecondary education, rather than on the number of individuals as was the case in data reported earlier in this report.

Figure 4. Characteristics of the Postsecondary Education Enrolled Population, 1965 to 2000

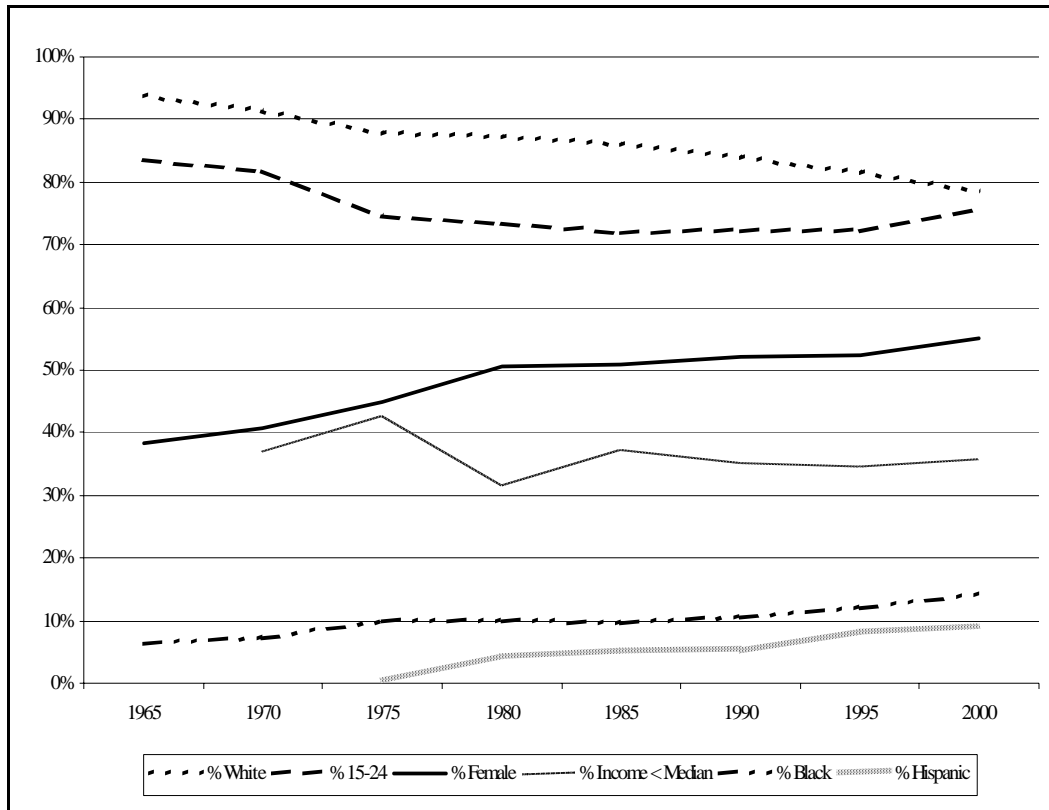


Figure 4 shows the dramatic increase in female postsecondary enrollment that has occurred over the last 35 years. In 1965, only 38% of students enrolled in postsecondary education were female — compared to 55% in 2000. There was a similarly dramatic decline in the postsecondary education population below the age of 25. In 1965, 84% of enrolled students were 15 to 24 years old — compared to 76% in 2000 (although, in recent years the 15 to 24 year old share has begun to rise). The percentage of postsecondary education students identified as white substantially decreased (from 94% to 78%); the black share of enrollment more than doubled (from 6% to 14%); Hispanic enrollment rose significantly from less than 1% in 1975 to somewhat more than 9% in 2000. Finally, a relatively steady proportion (about 63%) of the enrolled population had a family income above the median family income for that year.

Are these trends likely to continue into the future? A consideration of the historical and projected changes in the general population shown in **Figure 5** below offers some insight.

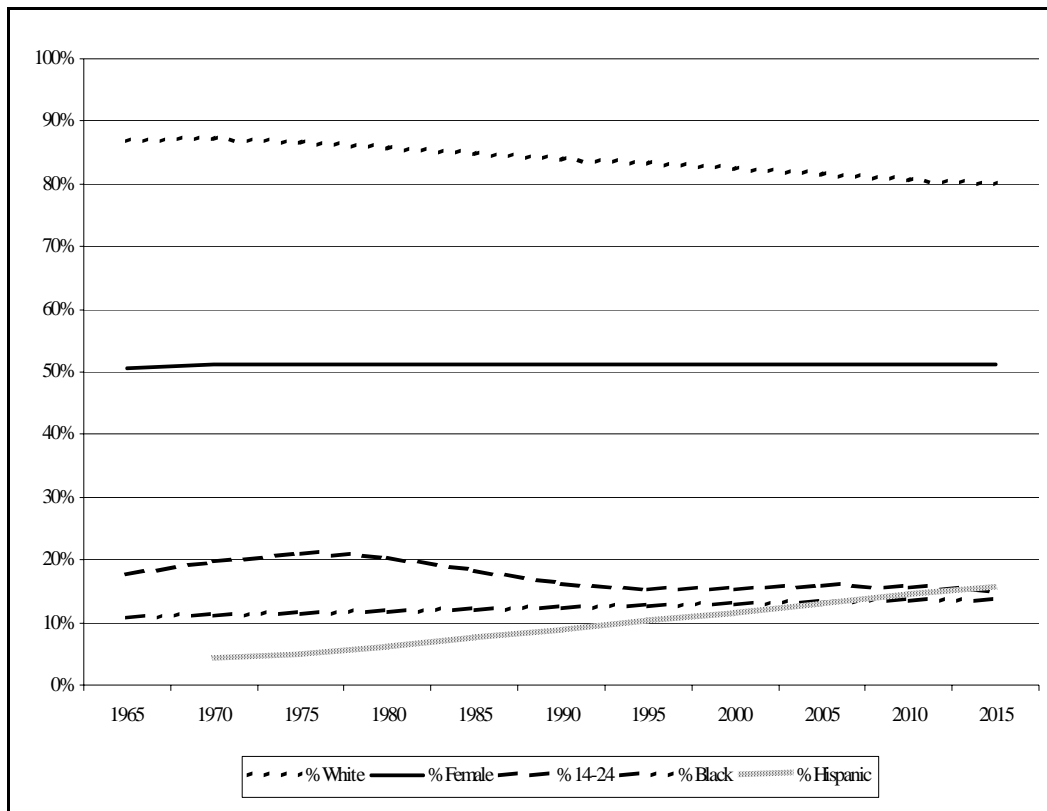
Figure 5. Characteristics of Total Population, 1965 to 2015

Figure 5 shows the actual and projected changes in the characteristics of the overall population from 1965 through 2015. As seen here, the proportion of females in the population has been steady and is expected to remain steady at just over 50%. The proportion of the overall population age 14 to 24 reached a high point in the aftermath of the baby boom (21% in 1975) and then began to decline. It is expected to continue to decline into the future (down to 15% in 2015) as the elderly portion of the U.S. population continues to grow.²³ Further, the historical and projected data show a steady decrease in the white proportion of the population from 87% in 1965 to 80% in 2015. In contrast, the relatively rapid increase in the Hispanic representation in the population is expected to continue — rising from 4% in 1970 to 16% in 2015.

A comparison of the two preceding figures shows that demographics alone have not dictated changes in the characteristics of the enrolled population. For some groups, there clearly has been a change in behavior. For example, females have made up a relatively consistent share of the total population but have significantly increased their representation in postsecondary education over time. This is primarily a function of a growth in the participation rate for women throughout this time period.

²³ Published Census Bureau population projections are by 5-year age group; thus, the age breakdown considered here (14 to 24) is not identical to that utilized previously in this report (15 to 24).

The patterns for the younger age cohort appear more complex. This cohort's share of total population declined from the mid 1970s until 2000 and is projected to continue to decline; the representation of this cohort in the enrolled student population declined until the mid 1990s. Even while declining as a portion of the enrolled student population, the participation rate of this age group in postsecondary education was increasing (data not shown here). Indeed, a higher proportion of this age cohort is enrolled today than previously. These data are not sufficient to reach any precise conclusion about whether there will be marked changes in the representation of this younger age cohort and concurrently of older age cohorts in postsecondary education in the near future.²⁴ Nevertheless, given the currently substantial representation in postsecondary education of older age groups, a similar distribution will probably continue in the near term.

The forces which have given rise to increased non-white and Hispanic participation may have an important demographic component. As these groups have grown into larger proportions of the general population, they have grown into larger proportions of the postsecondary education population. The Hispanic trendlines are particularly prominent. The major source of population growth in the United States during the last decade has been immigration and demographers agree that immigration will continue to fuel population growth in the coming years. Since the vast majority of contemporary immigrants are Hispanic, the Hispanic share of the total population is expected to continue to grow through 2015. Based on demographics alone, it seems reasonable to expect that the proportion of Hispanics in the postsecondary population will increase in the future. Further, given their overall representation in the general population, any increase in participation rates, moving closer to those of whites or Asians, would lead to greater Hispanic representation in postsecondary education.

Conclusions

Selected Findings. Among the significant findings presented in this report are the following. Race and ethnicity, and family income are clearly associated with undergraduate enrollment. For example, whites and Asians aged 15 to 24 are more likely to be enrolled than are blacks and Hispanics; similarly, individuals in this age group with higher family income participate at higher rates than do low-income individuals. At the same time, blacks and Hispanics constitute a sizeable portion of postsecondary enrollment — nearly one-quarter of 15 to 24 year old undergraduates and nearly a third of undergraduates over 24 years of age. Since the inception of the HEA, the minority share of postsecondary enrollment at all levels has grown markedly. Projected population changes suggest that Hispanics, in particular, will become a major potential source of minority students.

Non-traditional students (i.e., those older than 24 or enrolling on less than a full-time basis) are a large portion of undergraduate enrollment — nearly 4 out of every 10 undergraduates.

²⁴ The U.S. Department of Education projects that the 14 to 24 year old portion of total degree-credit enrollment in postsecondary education will not change substantially from 2000 to 2011 (*Projections of Education Statistics to 2011*, NCES 2001-083).

Female representation in postsecondary education has surged during the lifetime of the HEA. Women now make up well over half of enrollment. They appear to be particularly represented among older students enrolling as undergraduates in postsecondary education.

Implications for HEA Policymaking. What are some of the more important implications of some of these findings for policymaking regarding the HEA? Three clusters of implications are considered below.

Need-Based Student Aid. The continued association of family income with postsecondary participation despite a substantial investment in HEA need-based student aid may raise concerns about the effectiveness of these programs. As this report delineates, individuals from higher income families are more likely to enroll than are ones from poorer circumstances. Among the questions such a finding raises are the following: Are HEA need-based student aid programs adequately funded and appropriately targeted? Is the mix of HEA grants, loans, and work appropriate for students from different family incomes? Are there needs, other than financial, that should also be addressed?

Serving the Pipeline. The last question above helps to identify the second cluster of implications — the impact of the HEA on the K-12 education pipeline that feeds students into postsecondary education. The HEA authorizes several programs that serve to complement the Act's need-based student aid by supporting academic and non-academic intervention activities for disadvantaged secondary school students. These programs — principally the TRIO programs and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) — provide such services as tutoring, counseling, and mentoring to disadvantaged secondary school students in an effort to enable them to finish high school and pursue postsecondary education.²⁵ Such programs are premised on an understanding that enrollment of disadvantaged individuals in postsecondary education is not a function only of financial needs. Academic and other needs are there to be addressed.

The findings in this report that young black and Hispanic high school graduates participate in undergraduate education at lower rates than do whites and Asians, and that low-income individuals have much lower participation rates than do high-income individuals may raise concerns that the array of HEA's student aid and support services programs have not fully met their objectives. This may prompt a closer look at the funding levels for those programs, the extent to which the support services programs effectively deliver their services, and the extent to which they truly complement need-based student aid. Debate may also center on what further steps, if any, would be appropriate to take in the HEA to improve the academic preparation at the K-12 level, particularly that of low-income and minority children. For

²⁵ See CRS Report RL31622, TRIO and GEAR UP Programs: Status and Issues, by Jeffrey J. Kuenzi.

example, the current HEA program addressing the training of prospective teachers might be considered in light of these findings.²⁶

Non-Traditional Students. As was noted, there has been concern about the ability of HEA programs, particularly student aid programs, to serve non-traditional students. However valid those concerns might be (an issue beyond the scope of the present paper), it is clear that the non-traditional student is a major presence in postsecondary education. At a minimum, this suggests that the concerns expressed to date are unlikely to abate in the near term. Further, there may be merit in looking more closely at the non-traditional student. First, as was also suggested earlier, simply defining what population is appropriately identified as non-traditional is not without debate. Second, consideration might be given to assessing non-traditional students' participation in HEA programs, the actual needs (financial or other) that such students have for assistance from these programs, and what barriers, if any, might curtail their appropriate participation.

²⁶ CRS Report RL31254, *Pass Rates as an Accountability Measure for Teacher Education*, by James Stedman.