

White Students are Overrepresented at Elite Public Colleges while Black and Latino Students are Funneled into Overcrowded and Underfunded Open-Access Public Colleges, Says New Georgetown University Report

The gap in student spending has been growing between selective and open-access public colleges, exacerbating racial differences in bachelor's degree attainment rates

(Washington, DC, November 13, 2018) Misguided admissions practices and growing inequality in funding are splitting the public higher education system, which serves more than three-quarters of all college students, into two separate and unequal tracks, says new research from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW). The report, *Our Separate & Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students*, shows that the elite public four-year colleges do not represent the populations they are supposed to serve.

Whites are disproportionately represented at selective public colleges. They make up 64 percent of freshman enrollment at selective public colleges even though they are only 54 percent of the college-age population. Blacks are 15 percent of the college-age population, but only 7 percent of freshmen at selective public colleges. Latinos are 21 percent of the college-age population, but only 12 percent of freshmen at selective public colleges.

Access to selective public colleges matters because money matters: selective public colleges receive more in state and local appropriations per full-time equivalent (FTE) student than open-access public colleges. Selective public colleges then spend more money on instructional and academic support per student. In fact, the gap in instructional and academic support spending per student between open-access and selective public colleges has widened from \$8,800 in 2005 to \$10,600 in 2015.

The differences in spending contribute to wide variation in graduation rates. The average student has an 85 percent chance of graduating at a selective public college, compared to only 51 percent at an open-access public college. White students who attend selective public colleges have an 86 percent graduation rate, and Blacks and Latinos graduate at an 81 percent rate. At open-access public colleges, Whites graduate at a 55 percent rate while only 46 percent of Blacks and Latinos graduate.

Many students who could succeed in selective colleges do not get in. Selective public colleges over rely on standardized test scores as a measure of who should be admitted. The SAT and ACT alone predict as little as 15 percent of the variation in college graduation rates, and no more than 30 percent. The scores are primarily an indication of the quality of schooling and the educational attainment of an applicant's parents, factors that overwhelmingly favor White students.

At selective public colleges, students with average SAT scores (1000) or just above graduate at similar rates as those with very high SAT scores. Students with SAT scores of 1000-1099 graduate at a 79 percent rate, while students who score 1200 and above graduate at an 85 percent rate.

Nationwide, more than 340,000 Black and Latino students score above average on standardized admission tests, but only 19 percent of these high-scoring Black and Latino students attend a selective college. Meanwhile, 31 percent of White students who score above average on the SAT attend a selective college.

“Like many factors in college admissions, the argument favoring marginal differences in test scores is just another name for affirmative action for already-privileged Whites,” said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of CEW and lead author of the report. “There are far more Black and Latino students with the qualifications to attend selective colleges than ever get to attend one.”

Of the 41 states with selective public colleges, all spend more per student at their selective public colleges than they do on their open-access public colleges. In fact, 15 states spend at least twice as much per student on selective public colleges as open-access public colleges.

The result is that selective public colleges have far more resources than open-access public colleges. For instance, selective public colleges have 6.8 full-time faculty members for every 100 FTE students, while open-access public colleges have only 2.7 full-time faculty members per 100 FTE students.

“The funding divide between selective public colleges and open-access public colleges is due in part to an elite political bargain among legislators, governors, selective public colleges, and affluent, mostly White families,” said Martin Van Der Werf, associate director of editorial and postsecondary policy at CEW and co-author of the report.

At the state level, Blacks are not proportionately represented in selective public colleges in any state, although Kentucky comes close. Alabama has the widest gap: 32 of every 100 college-age residents are Black, but only seven of every 100 students at the state’s selective public universities are Black.

Florida is the only state where the proportion of Latinos in selective public colleges is equal to the proportion of Latinos in the college-age population. Other states have yawning gaps: in California, 48 percent of the college-age population is Latino, but only 25 percent of students in selective public colleges are Latino.

The unequal distribution of resources among colleges is troubling at a time when Blacks and Latinos are falling farther behind Whites in bachelor’s degree attainment. Despite the fact that Black and Latino college enrollment has soared in recent years, they have not yet reached the attainment rate (25%) that Whites achieved in 1980. The disparities in educational attainment are reflected in the labor market: on average, Whites earn \$50,000 annually while Blacks earn \$38,000 and Latinos earn \$33,000.

Other Key Findings:

- White enrollment at public open-access colleges has declined from 63 percent to 48 percent in just the past decade.
- Despite being only 5 percent of the college-age population, Asians constitute 12 percent of first-time fall enrollment at selective public colleges.
- In the United States, 37 percent of Whites have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 22 percent of Blacks and 17 percent of Latinos.

For the full report and a video highlighting key findings, visit cew.georgetown.edu/SUStates.

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