

In the Last Decade, Race-Conscious Affirmative Action Only Led to Incremental Progress in Closing Equity Gaps by Race/Ethnicity at Selective Universities, Georgetown University Report Says

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.

(Washington, DC, April 30, 2024) Less than one year ago, the US Supreme Court ended race-conscious affirmative action, drawing heightened attention to long-standing inequities in the higher education system. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce's (CEW) latest report demonstrates that even with race-conscious affirmative action, diversity gains made at the nation's most selective colleges and universities were marginal. As a result, selective institutions need to overhaul their admission policies to achieve equitable enrollment in a post-affirmative action society.

Progress Interrupted: Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions Prior to the End of Race-Conscious Affirmative Action is a retrospective analysis of the changing demographics at both selective and open-access institutions from 2009 to 2019, a time when race could be considered explicitly in the college admissions process.

“A small number of selective colleges are launchpads to positions of influence, but these institutions remain highly segregated by race/ethnicity and class,” CEW Director and lead author Jeff Strohl said. “Open-access institutions educate the vast majority of college students but, unfortunately, have the fewest resources and the lowest success rates. This chasm of inequity undermines the goal of the American postsecondary system to serve as an engine of opportunity for those who need it most.”

In 2019, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaska Native students collectively composed 37% of the college-age population but just 21% of selective college enrollments. Notably, Hispanic/Latino enrollment in selective colleges increased by about 50,000 students, almost doubling Hispanic/Latino enrollment in these colleges from 2009 to 2019. Black/African American students only increased their enrollment by 5,000 at selective universities, and American Indian/Alaska Native student enrollment declined over the period.

In contrast, white and Asian American/Pacific Islander students accounted for 60% of the college-age population but 73% of enrollments at selective institutions in 2019. The white college-age population decreased by 12% between 2009 and 2019, but their enrollment at selective colleges remained stable. Meanwhile, Asian American/Pacific Islander students experienced a 34% increase in enrollment at selective colleges as their college-age population grew by 55%.

Disparities by socioeconomic status were also clear. CEW researchers found that overall enrollments of Pell Grant recipients have steadily declined since their peak in 2009, primarily driven by decreases in enrollments at open-access institutions. While selective colleges experienced a small numeric increase in enrollment for students with Pell Grants, it was not nearly enough to offset the overall declines. In 2019, less than one in four students were Pell Grant recipients at the most selective colleges.

“Enrollment disparities between selective and open-access institutions matter because outcomes matter,” said Emma Nyhof, report co-author and policy analyst at CEW. “At the median, selective institutions spend more than twice as much on student services and academic support per student and have more full-time faculty per student than open-access colleges. These factors contribute to higher graduation rates and better opportunities for their graduates.”

At selective colleges and universities, graduation rates (78%) are more than double those at open-access institutions (37%). Similarly, graduation disparities between demographic groups are smaller at selective colleges across the board. Students who attend selective colleges also obtain graduate degrees at a 60% higher rate than students who attend open-access colleges, further increasing their earnings potential.

Selective colleges have higher price tags than open-access institutions, but they are not necessarily more expensive to attend because many students do not pay the full price. The average total cost of attending a selective institution in 2019 was over \$43,000. However, due to scholarships and financial aid, the average net price for students whose families’ income is less than \$30,000 was \$12,900, less than one-third of the sticker price. The lack of transparency surrounding college costs is one of the primary reasons why qualified students from underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups and lower-income backgrounds get diverted to the less selective colleges that they presume are more affordable.

“Broadening equitable access to the most selective colleges and universities is a vitally important goal moving forward,” said Catherine Morris, report co-author and senior writer/editor at CEW. “However, improving outcomes at open-access institutions—through increased state and local funding, as well as wraparound support services for students that begin in the K–12 system—could positively impact a much larger share of students and, ultimately, society as a whole.”

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic fallout, enrollment patterns have changed since 2019, particularly for open-access colleges. Given the profound impact the pandemic had on college enrollment, CEW researchers chose to end the analysis in 2019.

To view the full report, visit: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/progressinterrupted>

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