



Higher education is a powerful engine of social mobility, and the benefits to society of more people earning postsecondary credentials cannot be understated. College graduates earn more. They are less likely to be unemployed. They are more likely to vote, more likely to volunteer, and more likely to maintain good health.¹

The original Higher Education Act (HEA) was adopted in 1965 to expand opportunity, so that no student would be denied a chance to participate in higher education due to financial limitations or socioeconomic status. Since then, the U.S. has made substantial progress in expanding college access. College-going rates are rising for students at all income levels and for every major racial and ethnic group. For example, among low-income high school graduates, college-going rates climbed from 23 percent in 1972 to 49 percent in 2013.²

Despite this progress, there are significant gaps in college access and degree completion:

- Low-income students today are just now enrolling at the same rate high-income students did 40 years ago.³
- Low-income students and students of color are far less likely than other students to enroll in institutions where most students graduate and far more likely to enroll in institutions that graduate few of their students and saddle them with excessive debt.⁴
- Even after accounting for all grant aid, low-income students must finance an amount equivalent to 76 percent of their family's annual income to attend a public university for one year — a far higher burden than the 17 percent required for higher income students.⁵
- The bachelor's degree attainment rate among Black adults is just over half that of White adults, and the rate among Latino adults is even lower — just over one-third that of White adults.⁶
- Students from high-income families are more than three times more likely than students from low-income families to obtain a bachelor's degree ten years after high school.⁷

These disparities result in far too many low-income people and people of color being denied the dream of economic opportunity and upward mobility. And communities and states being denied the talented and diverse workforce so desperately needed to compete in this economy. Left unchallenged, these disparities will be even more devastating as our nation's population grows ever more diverse. People of color already make up the majority of our nation's young people. And by 2050, the population of Latino youth is expected to grow 137 percent (an increase of 31.3 million), Asians by 96 percent (4.4 million), and African Americans by 15 percent (2.3 million).⁸

The implications are clear: For these students' sake and for our nation's collective sake, more students of color and students from low-income families must get to college *and* graduate.

Congress has an important role in ensuring higher education institutions put these students and, by extension, our country onto a path of success and prosperity. **In reauthorizing HEA, Congress must push all institutions to effectively serve low-income students and students of color.**

A reauthorized HEA should:

- Improve college affordability for low-income students, students of color, and other underserved populations;
- Increase institutional accountability for equitable access and success;
- Invest in the development and scaling of evidence-based practices for improving student success; and
- Ensure students' safety and civil rights are protected.

1. <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2016-full-report.pdf> 2. <https://www.aqb.org/trusteeship/2016/januaryfebruary/higher-educations-critical-role-in-increasing-opportunity-in> 3. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016014.pdf> 4. Ed Trust analysis of IPEDS Fall enrollment, Fall 2014 (by race) and NCES National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12), 2011-12 (by Pell recipient status). 5. Ed Trust analysis of NPSAS:12, using PowerStats. Results based on full-time, full-year, one-institution dependent undergrads at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges. 6. Ed Trust analysis of NPSAS:12, using PowerStats. 7. Ed Trust analysis of ELS:02 8.1 https://www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2015/ac_15.pdf