

Missed Opportunities: A New Look at Disadvantaged College Aspirants

In 1995-96, more than 47% of undergraduates in the U.S. had family incomes of less than \$20,000. Almost 30% of all undergraduates were minorities. Yet, significant gaps in educational attainment and achievement remain. Low-income and minority groups have lower high school graduation rates, are less likely to take the necessary steps to achieve a bachelor's degree, and also have lower rates of degree attainment.

Recent data and information suggest that compounding factors—especially welfare participation, first-generation status, and parental divorce—exacerbate the obstacles that continue to confront low-income, minority, and other disadvantaged students.

Welfare Participation

Federal welfare reforms have substantially transformed America's welfare programs. The new law ends assistance after five cumulative years of receiving benefits, mandates a steady increase in welfare recipients' participation in work and work-related activities, and limits vocational education to 12 months. In addition, states must determine whether vocational education includes longer-term programs in the pursuit of a certificate or degree.

■ Welfare recipients are predominantly female, single, and minority. 90% are single mothers. Of these, 37% are White, 36% are Black, and 20% are Hispanic. Almost half of all recipients—42%—do not have a high school diploma.

■ State and institutional data indicate that the number of welfare recipients participating in postsecondary education has fallen since the 1996 reforms. For example, welfare student enrollment has fallen from 27,000 to 14,500 at the City University of New York (CUNY).

■ Welfare recipients who do reach college are independent, live off-campus, and attend two-year institutions. 86% are independent and only 3% live on-campus. Most attend either public two-year institutions, 59%, or private two-year institutions such as private career schools, 20%.

■ Independent welfare students have high financial need—96% have a zero Expected Family Contribution (EFC), compared to 21% of non-welfare recipients.

First-Generation Status

First-generation students—those whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less—face many barriers to college access, including limited knowledge of postsecondary admissions and financial aid processes, lack of support from family and friends, and poor academic preparation for college.

■ First-generation students are less likely to complete the necessary steps to enroll in a four-year institution. Only 36% aspire to a bachelor's degree or higher, 45% take the SAT or ACT, and only 26% apply to a four-year institution. By comparison, 78% of students for whom at least one parent has a bachelor's degree aspire to a bachelor's degree or higher, 82% take the SAT or ACT, and 71% apply to a four-year institution.

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■ First-generation students are more likely to delay enrollment in postsecondary education, which inhibits degree completion. Only 29% of first-generation students enroll in any postsecondary institution immediately after high school graduation, compared to 73% of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree.

■ 45% of all undergraduates are first-generation students. They are more likely to enroll on a part-time basis—53%, versus 38% of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree. They are concentrated in two-year institutions. 53% percent attend public two-year institutions and 8% attend private two-year institutions.

■ First-generation students also face barriers in attaining college degrees. Only 44% attain a degree within five years, compared to 56% of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree.

Parental Divorce

Divorce in the U.S. has had profound effects on the college-going experiences of children. Of particular concern is the ability of divorced parents to finance their children's postsecondary education, which often depends upon court settlements, state laws and obligations, and the decreased socioeconomic resources of custodial parents, especially those who do not remarry. The overall proportion of children under 18 living in single, divorced-parent households has been rising steadily, from less than 4% in 1970 to approximately 10% in 1995.

■ Children with divorced parents more often fail to take the necessary steps to enroll in a four-year institution. Less than half aspire to a bachelor's degree or higher, 55% take college entrance exams, and only 40% apply to a four-year institution. In comparison, 59% of students with married parents aspire to a bachelor's degree or higher, 67% take college entrance exams, and 51% apply to a four-year institution. The disparities between students with divorced and married parents persist across different income levels.

■ Dependent children of divorce who do enroll in college attend on a part-time basis more frequently than do students whose parents are married—34%, versus 26%. They also are less likely to attend private four-year institutions—15%, compared to 20% of undergraduates with married parents—and are more likely to attend public two-year institutions, 41% versus 35%.

■ The average family income of dependent students with divorced parents is lower than that of students with married parents, \$27,170 versus \$52,294. Consequently, they are more likely to have low EFCs. 46% of students with divorced parents have EFCs of \$3,000 or less, while only 27% of students with married parents do.

■ Children of divorce are also at risk of failing to complete a postsecondary degree. Only 23% of freshmen with divorced parents receive a bachelor's degree within five years, compared to 35% of those whose parents are married.

