

# Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

## Higher Education

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### *DePaul University*

Higher education is a central variable that affects people's ability to gain upward social mobility in U.S. society. Hence, exploring past and present cultural beliefs, policies and laws are important for understanding experiences of minorities in higher education. It is also crucial to understand the changes within higher education that have increased minority enrollment, diversified curriculum, and altered campus climates.

## Early Steps

Inequities in minority access to higher education have existed throughout the history of U.S. society. Education of Blacks was barred at all levels during the years of slavery. Yet in the northern states, abolitionist groups created colleges for the education of Blacks who were free or runaway slaves. The first of these was Cheney University, founded in 1837. Cheney and the other colleges founded during this era are recognized as the first historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

After the abolition of slavery, the United States embraced policies to segregate Black and White students in the school system. In the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court set a precedent for separate but equal education. Although the institutions [p. 613 ↓] for Black students were theoretically supposed to be of equivalent quality, the small number of existing Black colleges severely lacked critical educational resources.

*Fisk University students. The junior normal class of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, is shown seated on steps outside of building in the early 1900s. Since its conception in 1866, Fisk University has a long history as an educational institution and has trained a large number of important leaders in the Civil Rights Movement.*



Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-112357.

Nearly 60 years later, the legal segregation of schools was officially ended in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the segregation of schools based on race had led to unequal opportunities for Black students at all levels of education. Also, during this era, the U.S. government instituted the G.I. Bill, which provided college financial assistance for veterans of all races. Although the G.I. Bill did not fully address issues of Black college student enrollment, this educational funding was an important tool for Black veterans to access higher education.

## Affirmative Action

*Brown v. Board of Education* eradicated blatant segregation, and the G.I. Bill provided financial assistance, but inequities in minority college enrollment continued. During the 1960s, affirmative action was instituted as a tool to increase the numbers of minorities on college campuses.

Affirmative action for college admissions is a contentious issue for many reasons, and the courts continue to debate its use. The application of obvious quota systems in college admissions, ensuring that a given number of applicants will be of a specific race, is one area of debate. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978 was one of the most notable cases debating quotas. Allan Bakke, a White applicant, had twice applied to the medical school program at the University of California, Davis, and had twice been denied entrance. The medical school used different evaluation procedures

for White and minority candidates. In addition, the school reserved a specific number of seats for minority students. In its decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the use of race in college admissions is acceptable, but the Court also prohibited strict quotas intended to ensure minority enrollment.

Two decades later, in 1997, two crucial cases were filed against the University of Michigan. In *Gratz v. Bollinger*, Jennifer Gratz alleged that unlawful preference was given to minorities in the University of Michigan's undergraduate admissions. The university used a 150-point system to evaluate student qualifications. Of 150 points, 20 were given specifically for minority status. The Supreme Court determined that the university's use of points designed for race in its freshman admissions policy was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause and violated the intent of affirmative action.

But the outcome was different in the second lawsuit against the university. *Grutter v. Bollinger* alleged that the university gave unlawful preference to minorities in University of Michigan Law School admissions. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the university. The Court asserted that the University of Michigan's law school admissions policy is designed to ensure that applicants are evaluated based on individual criteria and that race is not a defining component of this evaluation.

## Racial Inequities in Higher Education

U.S. policies of minority inclusion have increased the numbers of minority students in colleges across the country. During the 1960s, only approximately 8% of [p. 614 ↓] Whites and 3% of Blacks were graduates of four-year colleges. Since then, college completion rates have increased for all races in the United States. Yet the 2000 U.S. Census reported that Whites and Asian Americans had higher rates of college completion in comparison with Black and Hispanic Americans. Only 18% of Black Americans age 25 years or older had a bachelor's, master's, doctorate, or other professional degree. The proportion of Hispanic Americans with postsecondary degrees was even lower at 12%. In comparison, 28% of White Americans and 49% of Asian Americans in this same age group held college credentials.

Although college completion for minorities is increasing, there are some disparities along the lines of institution type, area of study, level of degree, and sex. Many minority students are concentrated at community colleges. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that community colleges enroll 45% of all Black undergraduates and 55% of all Hispanic undergraduates. These figures are strongly related to the lower cost of tuition at two-year colleges, making these institutions more accessible to minorities. The higher percentage of minority attendance at community colleges is a concern, however, because an associate's degree does not provide credentials or earning power equivalent to that of a bachelor's degree.

In addition, the percentages of racial minorities remain low in critical areas of education such as math and science. The importance of including minorities in these areas of study has been recognized, and efforts are being made by agencies such as the National Science Foundation to increase enrollment of racial minorities in science programs.

Race is also an issue when exploring levels of degrees earned. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that for all bachelor's degrees earned in 2002–2003, African Americans accounted for approximately 9% and Hispanic Americans accounted for approximately 6%. The percentages of minority graduates decreases with advanced degrees. At the doctoral level, only approximately 5% of PhDs are awarded to African Americans and approximately 5% are awarded to Hispanic Americans.

College attendance rates also vary by sex category. This is most notable among African Americans. There is a significantly larger percentage of African American women enrolled in college as compared with African American men. The 2000 U.S. Census reported that approximately 44% of all 18- and 19-year-old Black females attended college, whereas only 28% of all 18- and 19-year-old Black males were enrolled in higher education.

Increased numbers of minorities in higher education is important because graduation from college continues to be a crucial tool for enhancing economic and social standing. Black Americans with a bachelor's degree earn approximately \$36,000 per year, which is roughly \$10,000 more than the earnings of Black Americans with only a high school diploma. Although college graduation is enhancing the economic status of minorities,

their bachelor's degree does not ensure the same earnings as does a bachelor's degree earned by White graduates. On average, Whites with a four-year college degree earn \$45,000 per year. In comparison, Blacks and Hispanics with a bachelor's degree earn \$9,000 and \$10,000 less, respectively.

Accessibility of higher education for the economically challenged is becoming more difficult. Most college funding comes from the state level, and the amount of available state funds for higher education has decreased. To offset this, colleges and universities are placing the burden on students by raising tuition. On average, college tuition is rising by 5% to 8% annually. The tuition hikes are moving at a rate faster than the growth in family income, so college tuition requires a greater share of household earnings. This shift is a significant burden for minority students and their families, who on average have lower incomes. To assist with tuition increases, the federal government has expanded its student loan programs. Student loans open more opportunities for minority students, yet these graduates will need to shoulder the burden of debt after their graduation.

It is important to note that the experiences of minorities in higher education vary by race. Although considered a minority group, Asian Americans have much better success in higher education even compared with White Americans. One factor is that average median income is higher for Asian Americans, helping their families to pay college tuition. In comparison, because of lower than average incomes, African Americans and Hispanic Americans suffer more severely as a result of tuition increases. Also, cultural differences may enhance the significance of postsecondary degrees for Asian Americans. Asian American families are often more supportive of educational attainment for their younger generations.

All areas of higher education are affected by racial inequities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, minorities currently constitute less than 15% of total [p. 615 ↓] college and university faculty members. Many minority faculty members are concentrated at the community college level, with fewer working at the university level. But efforts are being made to increase minority faculty members because they are important for creating a diverse college environment, and many minority faculty members have made significant contributions to restructuring college curricula and creating new pedagogies.

# Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Higher Education

Within higher education, historically Black colleges and tribal colleges were designed specifically to address the postsecondary educational needs of minorities. Cheney University, founded in 1837, is recognized as the first HBCU. The first tribal college, Navajo Community College (currently called Diné College), was started in 1968. In the United States, there are currently 32 federally recognized tribal colleges and universities and 106 HBCUs.

Rather than isolating the minority experience, many people are contending that the racial landscape of the entire system of higher education must become more multicultural. During the 1960s and 1970s, minority scholars and students began to highlight how postsecondary institutions and college curricula created Anglocentric campuses that were biased in defining what constitutes history and knowledge. As a result, multiculturalism was infused throughout higher education curricula. Many postsecondary institutions are now embracing majors, minors, certificates, and individual courses that focus on groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latin Americans. These programs and courses move the curriculum away from Anglocentric perspectives and provide students with different lenses for exploring college course material and wider social life.

Outside of the classroom, minority students face many other challenges in their experiences in higher education. Racially diverse and inclusive campus climates continue to be a concern. Institutional use of minorities for sports mascots remains a source of racial tension. Some believe that the use of humans as mascots creates discriminatory campus climates, whereas others believe that these mascots are simply images used to increase school spirit.

To improve retention of minority students, many campuses are instituting measures to enhance diversity. Many schools have developed requirements that students of all races take diversity courses for graduation. Also, colleges have created offices of minority student affairs to assist students in their transition to and success in college.

Recently, the National Campus Diversity Project researched minority inclusion in higher education and identified the most successful tools for achieving diverse and inclusive college campuses. To support and retain minority students, the report recommended funding for diversity programs, transformation of curriculum, academic support programs for minority students, and continual assessment of campus climate.

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*See also*

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