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**INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION POLICY**

The Institute for Higher Education Policy is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to increasing access and success in postsecondary education around the world. Established in 1993, the Washington, D.C.-based organization uses unique research and innovative programs to inform key decision makers who shape public policy and support economic and social development.

A SNAPSHOT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In recognition of national African-American History Month, the Institute for Higher Education Policy wishes to highlight the trends and present-day experiences of African-American college students. Recognizing that our society benefits tremendously from an educated citizenry, there must be a renewed commitment to ensuring educational opportunity, particularly for those students for whom opportunity has been elusive.

The following is an overview of facts and trends highlighting the postsecondary experiences and educational opportunities of African Americans. This brief is not a comprehensive listing, but we do hope that it provides additional context for understanding some of the lingering challenges impeding the educational progress of African Americans.

OVERVIEW

African Americans have always recognized the value of an education and its power for transforming lives and communities. During the earliest years of U.S. history, African Americans were prohibited from learning to read or write. These efforts were designed to ensure submission while enslaved. Revolts by the enslaved community, like that led by Nat Turner in Virginia, frightened plantation owners, who reacted by limiting information and schooling. Despite the risks, the Quaker community, other abolitionists, and educated slaves remained committed to educating more African Americans by secretly offering them tutoring and instruction.

Even though educating African Americans was rare and dangerous in 19th century America, some higher education institutions began to provide access: Dartmouth College in 1824 and Oberlin College in 1833. In 1837, Richard Humphreys, a Quaker from Philadelphia, founded the Institute for Colored Youth, which is known today as Cheyney University, the oldest historically Black college and university in the nation.

Following the American Civil War (1861–65), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established to become “lighthouses” for African Americans who were prohibited from attending predominantly White institutions. The early establishment of HBCUs included Lincoln University in 1854 and Wilberforce University in 1856. Unfortunately, some HBCUs closed during the 20th century due to competition, the Great Depression, and financial difficulties.

Nevertheless, 20th century America brought about crucial turning points for educational access and success of African Americans. The movement for equal opportunity began at the landmark decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) and peaked through the Civil Rights Movement (1955–68). In the 1954 Supreme Court ruling (*Brown v. Board of Education*), it was declared that racial segregation in education was unconstitutional. Several years later, in 1962, James Meredith became the first African-American student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Violence and riots ensued, causing President Kennedy to send 5,000 federal troops to the campus.

Today African-Americans students are still challenged by the historical vestiges of discrimination as well as the barriers associated with financial and other factors. The nearly 40 million African Americans residing in the United States—representing approximately 13 percent of the total population—are three times more likely (24 percent) to live in poverty than Whites (8 percent). Further, opportunity gaps related to college enrollment and completion persist for African-American students with only 11 percent being enrolled in postsecondary education.

ENROLLMENT RATES

- In 2007, the percentage of recent high school completers who enrolled in college was 67 percent for all, 56 percent for African Americans.
- African-American students enroll in all types of universities, with 39 percent enrolling in public two-year colleges.
- Compared to other racial groups, African-Americans are over-represented in the private-for-profit sector. Low-income, African-American women were more likely than any other group (race/ethnicity, economic status) to enroll in these institutions.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

- African-American students who did not enroll in college are likely to report that the need to work was important in their decision not to enroll in college. Almost half of African-American students stated that the need to work was “extremely” or “very” important, compared with their peers.
- In 2003–04, African-American students were more likely to have remaining financial need after grants compared with their peers—70 percent of African-American students had remaining need. About 54 percent of African-American students borrowed to meet that need, a proportion that is higher than their peers.
- About 46 percent of all African-American undergraduate students receive federal Pell Grant awards, accounting for approximately one quarter of all recipients.

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

- In 2007–08, 49 percent of African-American students were first-generation college students and 46 percent had taken remedial courses, reinforcing the need for academic and social supports such as bridge programs, first-year experience courses, learning communities, and financial literacy programs.
- With respect to “high-impact practices” that prompt greater student engagement and success, African-American students report participation in learning communities and research with faculty at rates comparable to White students, but indicate less frequent participation in study abroad and senior capstone experiences.
- Despite the proliferation of diversity programs, African-American students continue to report, at a higher rate than both White students and other minority populations, “guarded, tense, and threatening” interactions with other students.

DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- Thirty-nine percent of first-time African-American students who started at a public four-year college graduated with a bachelor's degree in six years, compared to the overall rate of 53 percent.
- If first-time African-American students earned degrees at a rate similar to White students, there would be 16,000 more with bachelor's degrees from public four-year institutions and 11,000 more from private nonprofit institutions.
- Within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines—key areas for meeting national workforce needs—the bachelor's degree completion gap is even wider than overall: nearly 70 percent for White students compared with 42 percent for African Americans and 49 percent for Hispanics.
- African-American seniors more often aspired to earn master's degrees than their peers in other racial categories. Of African-American seniors who graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2000, about 22 percent enrolled in a master's degree program one year later.

FINAL THOUGHTS: A RENEWED COMMITMENT

In spite of the challenges highlighted in this brief, the African-American community's unwavering fight to obtain access to education has afforded generations of students a chance to graduate from college successfully. African-American students today have made great strides in education notwithstanding many bleak predictions and insurmountable odds. For example, the nation's 105 HBCUs continue to provide learning opportunities for African-American students and graduates over 50 percent of African-American professionals—many of whom serve in the fields of teaching, math, and science.

With 4.5 million African Americans currently between the ages of 18–24—the traditional age range for those preparing for and attending college—this untapped student population represents a key source of human capital in an increasingly diverse nation. Ensuring that they are able to fully take advantage of educational opportunities is critical to these individuals as well as the country as a whole.

Understanding issues that African-American students continue to face in seeking higher education degrees is an important step in making their aspirations reality. With this

understanding comes a number of actionable steps for renewing the country's commitment to postsecondary opportunity for African-American students, including targeting early awareness and college readiness outreach efforts; ensuring sufficient aid through the Pell Grant and other financial aid programs; increasing funding for institutions serving these students, particularly historically underfunded minority-serving institutions and community colleges; enhancing academic and social support programs linked to improved classroom learning; and better understanding of these students and their experiences so that interventions can be developed to help them persist to a degree. Through coordinated and targeted support, higher education can continue to be an important vehicle for African-American success.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For additional information and a list of citations, please send an e-mail to ihep@ihep.org.

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