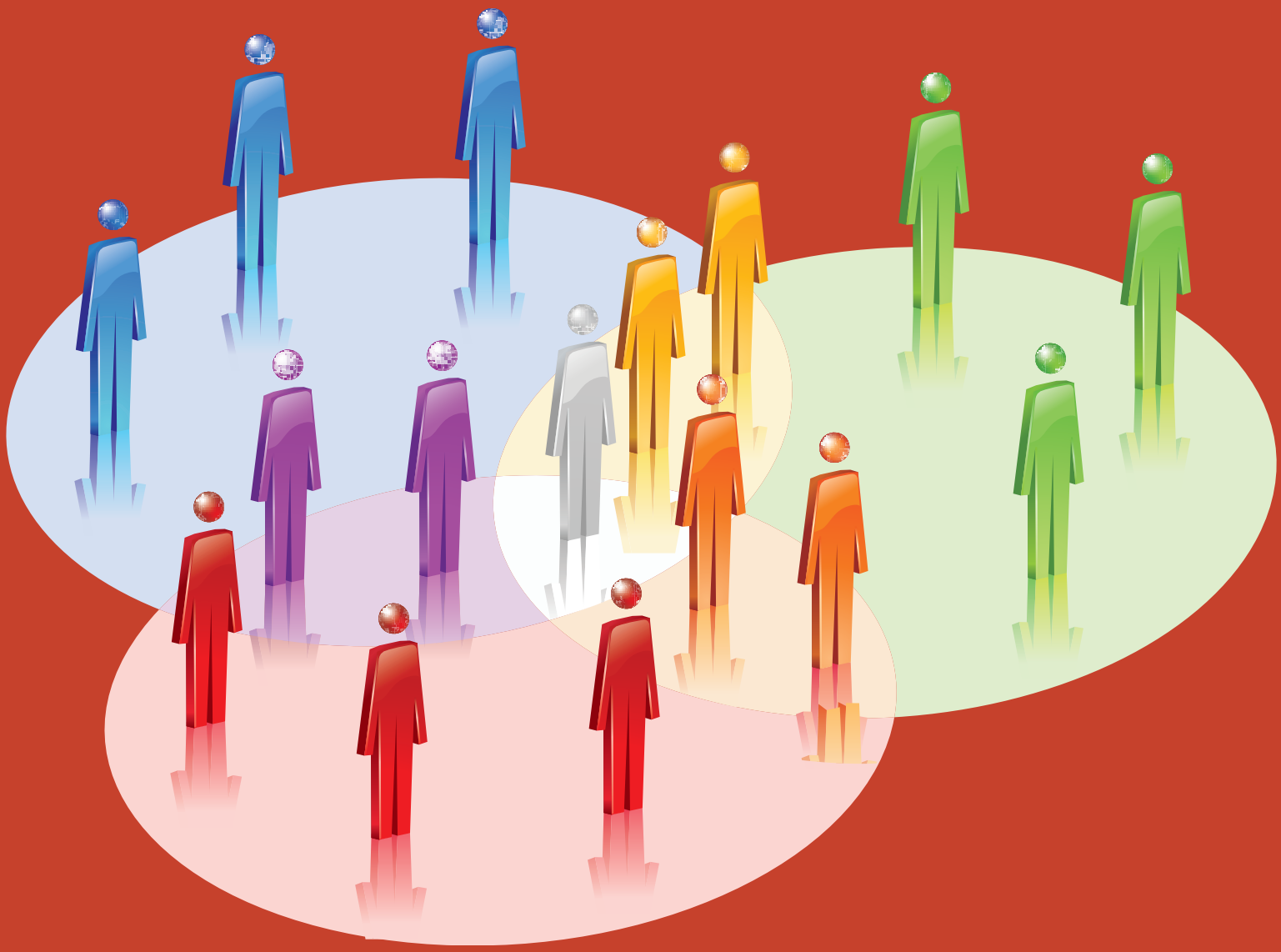
Why Access Matters:
The Community College Student Body

Christopher M. Mullin



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More and more Americans today acknowledge the value of community colleges to students and community partners. An important reason for this awakening, among many others, rests on the growing realization that reported rates of success for students at community colleges are understated and misleading. In addition, the increasing focus on public returns on investment may be incentivizing colleges and universities to be more discerning about whom they enroll. Needless to say, these changes do not bode well for college access.

With the growing attention the public is paying to community colleges, it is important to remember just whom community colleges serve, noting what is distinctive and what has changed about this population. In this brief, I consider the unique variety of students who are drawn to and served by community colleges.

The magnitude of access is generally understood at the level of fall enrollments. For institutions that enroll students year-round, however, more students access higher education than is commonly realized. At community colleges, for example, referencing unduplicated year-round enrollments increases the number of students accessing higher education by 56%. The magnitude of access is increased even further when noncredit students are included.

Between 1993 and 2009, the student body—as defined by the distribution, not the number, of students—on community college campuses shifted. For instance, students under the age of 18 are increasingly enrolling in community colleges. While the student body is becoming increasingly younger, the characteristics of younger students are not homogenous across all sectors of higher education. Community college students have a greater proportion of students with various risk factors when compared to all of higher education.

These colleges also provide access to nearly half of all minority undergraduate students and more than 40% of undergraduate students living in poverty.

Community colleges are open access and do not, with the rare exception, build a student body. As this brief points out, the open door philosophy not only benefits students attending community colleges, but also benefits other sectors of higher education. Unfortunately, other members of the higher education community may not appreciate this role that community colleges play.

While enrollments continue to increase, there is the concern, among some, that a focus on completion has the potential to influence just who is allowed to take advantage of educational opportunities. In policy conversations, especially those concerned with policies related to access and choice, there is a silent movement to redirect educational opportunity to “deserving” students. This brief highlights some actions that can be taken to ensure that access is not deteriorated.

Policy actors engaged in ensuring the United States has the most educated workforce in the world must remember that all citizens of a nation are included in the denominator of the equation. To ensure the focus on completion does not result in a more restricted student body, the institutions that provide the broadest swath of opportunity must be incentivized to continue providing access. Access to college, for everyone, matters.

Why Access Matters:
The Community College Student Body

Introduction

More and more Americans today acknowledge the value of community colleges to students and community partners. Perceptions are changing: 71% of the public believes that it is sometimes better to start at a community college than at a 4-year college (Associated Press, 2010). The most expensive is no longer the most valued: 22% of all college students from families making more than $100,000 attend community colleges (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2011).

The shift in perceptions is due to a variety of factors. First, students who start at a community college are just as likely to earn a bachelor's degree after transferring to a 4-year college as are students who start at a 4-year institution (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2009). Second, there is a growing recognition that post-college earnings vary as much by type of academic credential attained and subsequent occupation as they do by the level of education completed (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Third, the public is beginning to understand that current measures of student success concerning community colleges paint an inaccurately unflattering portrait of the colleges. On this last point, it is worth recalling that the Department of Education's congressionally mandated Committee on Measures of Student Success (CMSS) found, "Although federal graduation rates provide important and comparable data across institutional sectors, limitations in the data understate the success of students enrolled at two-year institutions and can be misleading to the public" (2011, p. 4).

Despite these positive developments, however, the many completion agendas driving higher education policy have often been shaped by, and still rely on, the limited data of yesterday. For example, misleading data in Texas continue to inform one organization's completion agenda (Fain, 2011a). In addition, the increasing focus on public returns on investment may be incentivizing colleges and universities to be more discerning about whom they enroll. Needless to say, these changes do not bode well for college access.

With all the attention the public is paying to community colleges, and their role in helping meet the nation's pressing need to produce more graduates more efficiently, it is important to remember just whom community colleges serve, noting what is distinctive and what has changed about this population. In this brief, I consider the variety of students who are drawn to and served by community colleges.

More Students Access Higher Education Than Commonly Realized

In the fall semester of 1953, just 15% of Americans aged 18 to 24 were enrolled in higher education (Grant & Lind, 1974), a figure that increased to 30% in 1969 and 41% in 2009 (Simon & Grant, 1970; Snyder & Dillow, 2011). College enrollment for 25- to 29-year-olds and 30- to 34-year-olds more than doubled from 1967 to 2009 (Baime & Mullin, 2011). Overall undergraduate fall enrollment in 1967 was 6 million students; by 2009 it had increased nearly three-fold to 17.6 million (Snyder & Dillow, 2011).

This figure captures only fall enrollments, and thus loses a large segment of the community college population. Twelve-month unduplicated headcount enrollment shows that community colleges served 56% more students in 2008–2009 than they served in fall 2008 (see Table 1). The number of full-time, first-time degree-seeking students at 2-year public colleges (732,392), the indicator used to compute the federal completion rate, includes only about 7% of the community college student body nationally--hardly a representative sample.

In addition to these credit enrollments, community colleges also enroll students in noncredit offerings. AACC estimates that 5 million students were enrolled in noncredit programs in fall 2008 (AACC, 2011). There are substantial challenges quantifying noncredit enrollments, however (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008).

Redefining the "Traditional" Student

Age Trends at Community Colleges: A Shifting Student Body

Changes in the age structure of the higher education student body began as early as the 1970s. A contributing factor to this shift was substantial increased enrollment of women over the age of 35, an enrollment that increased 67.5% between 1972 and 1976 (Grant & Lind, 1979). Undergraduate female enrollment surpassed that of males in 1978 and has continued to do so (Snyder & Dillow, 2011): For instance, women constituted 58% of enrollments at community colleges in fall 2008 (AACC, 2011). The number of men enrolled in higher education as undergraduates remained essentially flat for 25 years, from 1975 to 1999 (see Figure A1, in appendix).

Between 1993 and 2009, the student body—as defined by the distribution, not number, of students—on community college campuses shifted, though not evenly. As illustrated in Figure 1, the student body is becoming younger. Enrollment trends for students aged 25 to 34 and 35 to 50 mirror shifts in the U.S. resident population. For students aged 18 to 24, enrollments have fluctuated, whereas the distribution of this age group in relation to the general U.S. population remained relatively flat.

All age groups have experienced an increase in the number of students enrolled in fall 2009 when compared to fall 1993 (see Table A1, in appendix). It is important to note the extent to which greater numbers of students under the age of 18 are enrolling in community colleges. In 1993, just 1.6% of the student body was under the age of 18; in 2009, this group had increased to 7%. This increase is due in large part to programs that provide students with the opportunity to take courses in high school for college credit (Vargas & Miller, 2011). Programs such as Texas' Early College High Schools—targeted to first-generation college goers, low-income students, minority students, and English language learners—partner community colleges and secondary

Table 1

Undergraduate Credit Enrollment, by Type of Student Count, Comparative Analyses and Sector: 2008–2009

Sector	Type of Student Count			Comparative Analyses	
		Fall 2008[b, c]			
	12-month unduplicated headcount: 2008–2009[a]	Headcount enrollment	FTFT degree seeking students:	Percent increase in enrollments between Fall 2008 and 12-month unduplicated headcount enrollment	FTFT as a percent of 12-month unduplicated headcount enrollment
Public					
Less than 2-year	106,468	67,075	15,452	59	15
2-year	10,452,789	6,693,185	732,392	56	7
4-year	7,237,615	5,951,146	992,922	22	14
Private					
Less than 2-year	23,888	11,821	4,444	102	19
2-year	59,253	46,355	10,998	28	19
4-year	2,948,610	2,501,295	487,281	18	17
For profit					
Less than 2-year	466,169	263,013	101,699	77	22
2-year	673,785	361,091	114,391	87	17
4-year	1,699,460	942,306	129,096	80	8

Sources: NCES (2011b), Table 74; NCES (2011d), Tables 1 and 18.

Note. FTFT: Full-time, first-time. Public 2-year data differ from those provided by the AACC (2011) because community colleges that offer a bachelor's degree are classified as "public 4-year" by NCES. AACC includes these colleges as community colleges in calculations.

a Adapted from NCES (2011b), Table 74.

b Adapted from NCES (2011d), Table 1.

c Adapted from NCES (2011d), Table 18.

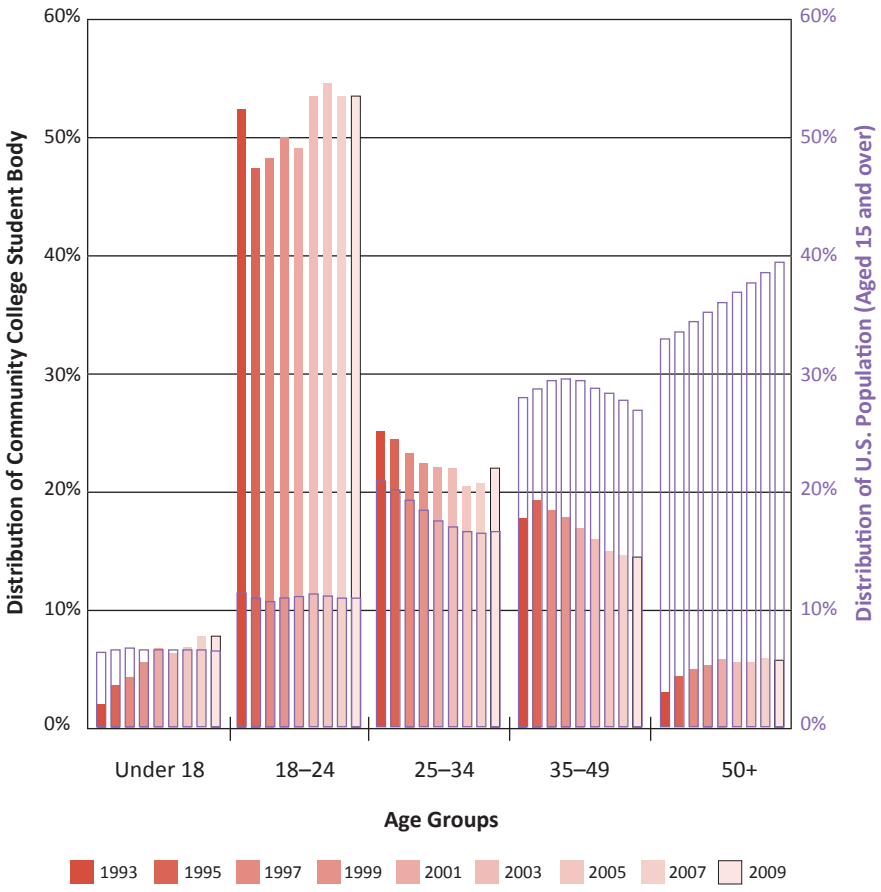
schools to allow high school students to earn an associate of arts degree (Texas Education Agency, 2010). Research in nine states in the Southeast found that 8% of graduates at public 2-year institutions took college-level courses in high school and that they graduated in less time than did students who had not taken such courses in high school (Marks & Lord, 2011).

Despite Age Shifts, Community College Students Not "Traditional"

The traditional college student has long been defined as the student who graduates high school and enrolls in college the following fall semester; nationally, 67% of undergraduates are under the age of 25 (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). While this age-based conception of a "traditional" student remains, the characteristics of younger students are not homogenous. A greater percent of 18- to 24-year-olds at community colleges, compared to all other sectors of higher education combined, identified themselves as employees who had decided to enroll in college (20% compared to 9%), students enrolled exclusively part time during the academic year (44% compared to 11%), or students that lived with parents (61% compared to 19%; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011a). None of these characteristics is associated with the concept of the "traditional" student.

Figure 1

Distribution of the Community College Student Body and U.S. Population: 1993 to 2009 (odd years)



Sources: NCES (2011c); Phillippe & Gonzalez Sullivan (2005); U.S. Census Bureau (2002, 2011).

Notes. These values represent the distribution and not total counts of observed populations. As such, what may appear as an incline or decline may be the opposite in terms of actual counts. (See Table A1, in appendix.) Age at enrollment is only reported to IPEDS for odd years.

For community colleges, the reality is that, despite having the lowest tuition and fee costs of any sector of higher education ($2,963 for a full-time, full-year student in the fall of 2011; Baum & Ma, 2011), students need to work: 84% of community college students work and 60% work more than 20 hours a week (NCES, 2011a). Not surprisingly, research has shown that working more than 20 hours a week is a risk factor for not completing (Cook & King, 2007; Orozco & Cauthen, 2009). There are other identified risk factors related to completion; compared to the rest of higher education, these characteristics are found in a greater percentage of the community college student body (see Figure 2).[1] Unfortunately, these are not characteristics such as hair color that can easily be changed.

A Home for Students of Color

Since passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, higher education has served an increased number and percentage of students of color (see Figure 3). Community colleges have historically enrolled approximately half of all undergraduate students

of color (AACC, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2011; Snyder & Hoffman, 1992). Community colleges are not just enrolling students of color—they are providing access to success. Between 1989–1990 and 2009–2010, the number of students of color walking across the stage at graduation has increased at a greater pace than has the pace of those walking through the front door and enrolling, while a tremendous, if precisely unknown, number of others continued their studies by transferring to another institution (Mullin, 2011).

An Affordable Start

In 2006, 23.6 million people aged 18 or over were living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith, 2007), with approximately 4 million enrolling in higher education as undergraduates during the 2007–2008 academic year (NCES, 2011a). Community colleges enrolled 1.7 million, or 41%, of all undergraduate students living in poverty in 2007–2008; approximately one in five community colleges students lived in poverty that year (NCES, 2011a).

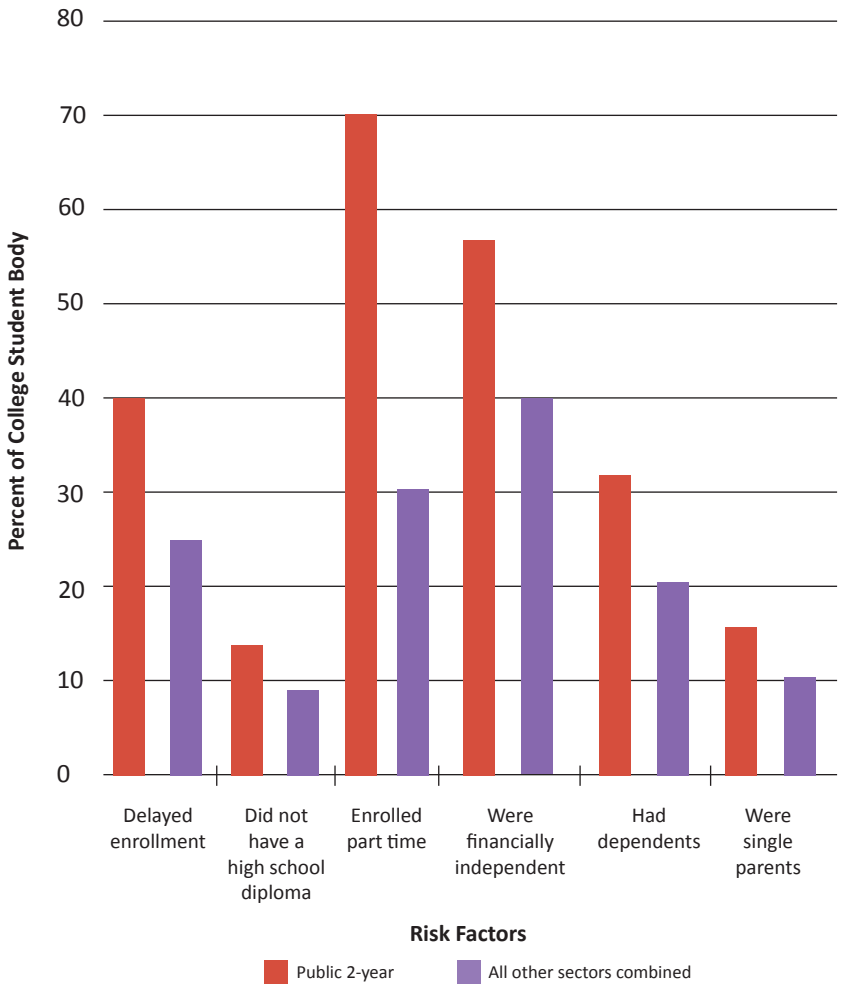
The localized focus coupled with the low cost to the students and the focus on access to opportunity make community colleges viable options for those of modest income: 14% of dependent community college students and 35% of independent students had incomes below $20,000 in 2007–2008 (NCES, 2011a).

Body Building

At many of the nation's colleges and universities, providing access has traditionally been a process by which institutions selected their student body from a pool of candidates through some type of enrollment management model (Kurz & Scannell, 2006). Some have evolved to include orientation programs that serve to predict whether the student will be successful at the institution. Predictive analytics allow institutions to better understand, within three weeks, the likelihood of success for potential students (Lange & Smith, 2010). While having this information is powerful, what one does with it is even more powerful. These data could be used proactively to identify students who are likely to struggle and match them with the supports they need to be successful. Alternatively, predictive analytics could be used punitively by dropping students who are likely to be unsuccessful. For example, for-profit institutions have instituted orientation programs to assist in the creation of student bodies more likely to be successful.

Figure 2

Enrollment Distribution of Students With Characteristics That May Adversely Affect Persistence and Attainment, for Community Colleges and All Other Sectors Combined: 2007–2008



Source: NCES (2011a)

A financial analyst has called one such program "an innovative approach to improving student outcomes" (Fain, 2011b).

Community colleges are open access and do not, with the rare exception, build a student body. The open door philosophy not only benefits students attending community colleges, but also indirectly benefits other sectors. Selective institutions can identify academically prepared students to fill spots when students leave the college unexpectedly, backfill an otherwise unfruitful recruitment yield (Handel, 2011), and even help diversify their student body (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). For 4-year institutions that rely heavily on students incurring debt to pay for college, accepting transfer students from a community college with no or relatively low student debt and a high likelihood of graduating helps to lower cohort default rates and pending student debt metrics. Interestingly, institutions within these sectors have made the decision to disparage community colleges by omitting the transfers they rely on (i.e., transfer rates) when referring to community college success only in terms of graduation rates.

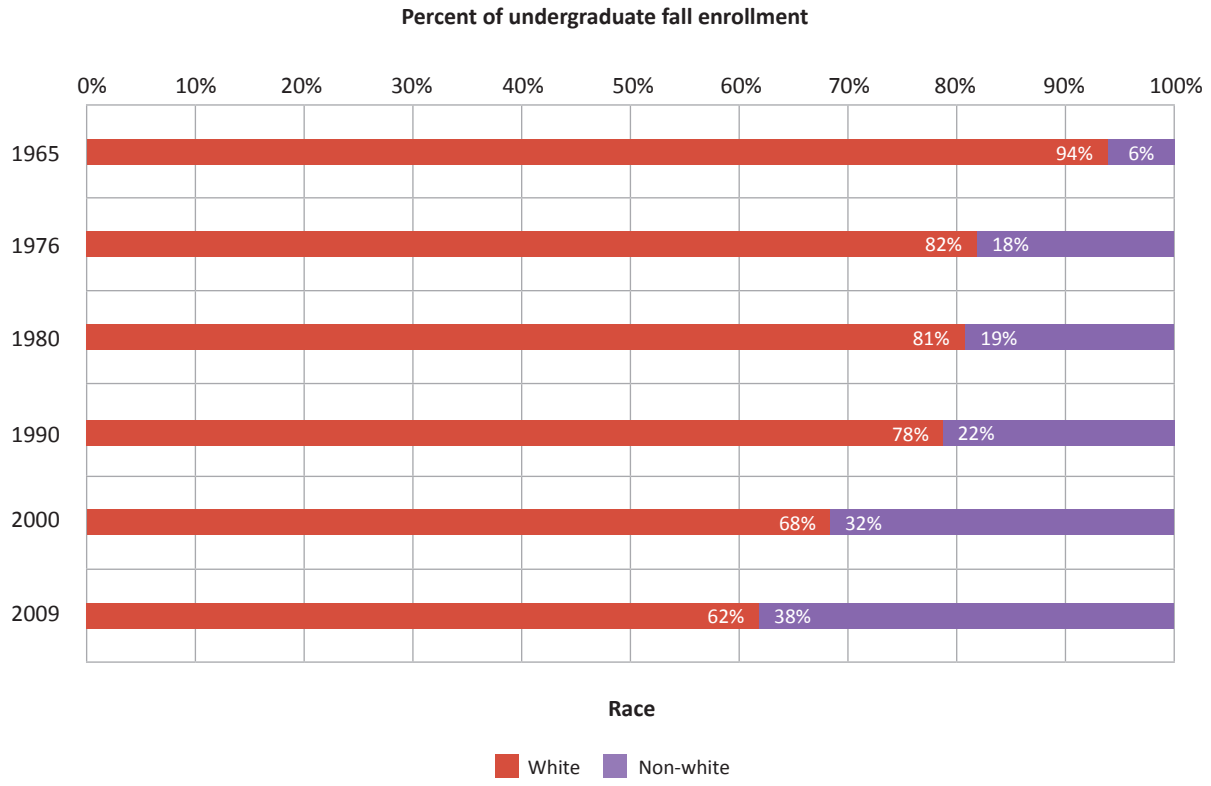
Maintaining a Focus on Access

Being more selective undoubtedly increases the perceptions and, even more so, the superficial measures of institutional effectiveness. Baum and Ma (2011) found that graduation rates at 4-year institutions dropped as acceptance rates increased: 83% graduated at institutions where fewer than 25% of applicants were accepted, and 27% graduated at open admission colleges where essentially 100% were accepted.

There is the concern, among some, that a focus on completion has the potential to influence just who is allowed to take advantage of educational opportunities. In policy conversations, especially with regard to policies related to access and choice, there is a silent movement to redirect educational opportunity to those students deemed "deserving."

Figure 3

Undergraduate Fall Enrollment, by Race: Select Years



Sources: Simon & Grant (1969); Snyder & Dillow (2011); Snyder & Hoffman (1992).

The recent congressional elimination of Title IV eligibility for ability to benefit (AtB) students serves as just one example of the emphasis on serving those who are most likely to succeed. Community colleges serve approximately 60% of AtB students (NCES, 2011a). This new federal policy contradicts that of many institutions that have been dedicated to serving this population. It also disproportionately impacts populations already underrepresented in terms of student success: An estimated 19% of AtB students were Black and 31% were Hispanic, whereas these populations each make up 14% of higher education's undergraduate student body (NCES, 2011a). Although college graduation for these students is a lesser probability than it is for students that are better academically prepared, this policy may well deny huge personal and social benefit to tens of thousands of students. The impact of this change on students is palpable: Aspiring college students whose K–12 experience was either inadequate or incomplete will need to take an alternative path to federal financial supports needed to afford higher education. One such path is the General Educational Development (GED) test, but that exam is undergoing a revision that has led to some concern about the test itself becoming less accessible (Cora, 2011; Smith, 2011).[2]

There surely are policies that can be adopted to ensure that access is not deteriorated. One action includes aligning the student body with the market of potential beneficiaries. For example, the Access to Success initiative, involving twenty-four state higher education systems, explicitly measures access by determining whether a higher education system's entering class reflects the socioeconomic and racial or ethnic profile of each state's high school graduates (Engle & Lynch, 2009). Another action is to ensure that performance measures include both counts as well as derived values, such as percents, for students entering college and reaching certain levels of success. For example, the state of Indiana has made strides in this direction (Kiley, 2011).[3] Finally, "input adjusted" outcome metrics is an emerging policy focus that may serve to encourage colleges to continue to serve these students without fear of being viewed as "ineffective."

Moving Forward

Policy actors engaged in ensuring the United States has the most educated workforce in the world must remember that all citizens of a nation are included in the denominator of the equation. To ensure that the focus on completion does not result in a more restricted student body, the institutions that provide the broadest swath of opportunity must be incentivized to continue to provide access. Access to college, for everyone, matters.

Notes and References

Notes

[1] For-profit institutions also serve a large number of students with risk factors, but, as discussed in this brief, a few large actors in this sector are more selective in whom they enroll. The sector has already seen a decrease in students receiving the Pell Grant, for example (Mullin & Phillippe, 2011).

[2] The GED was first used in 1942 for returning World War II soldiers who did not have a high school diploma. It was first administered to civilians in 1947. The GED has been revised three times: in 1978, 1988, and 2002 (American Council on Education, 2010).

[3] A discussion of performance funding is beyond the scope of this brief. For an understanding of performance funding I refer the reader to Burke (1998); McLendon, Hearn, and Deaton (2006); and Shulock (2011).

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Appendix

Table A1

Community College Fall Credit Headcount Enrollment, by Age Groups: Fall 1993 to Fall 2009

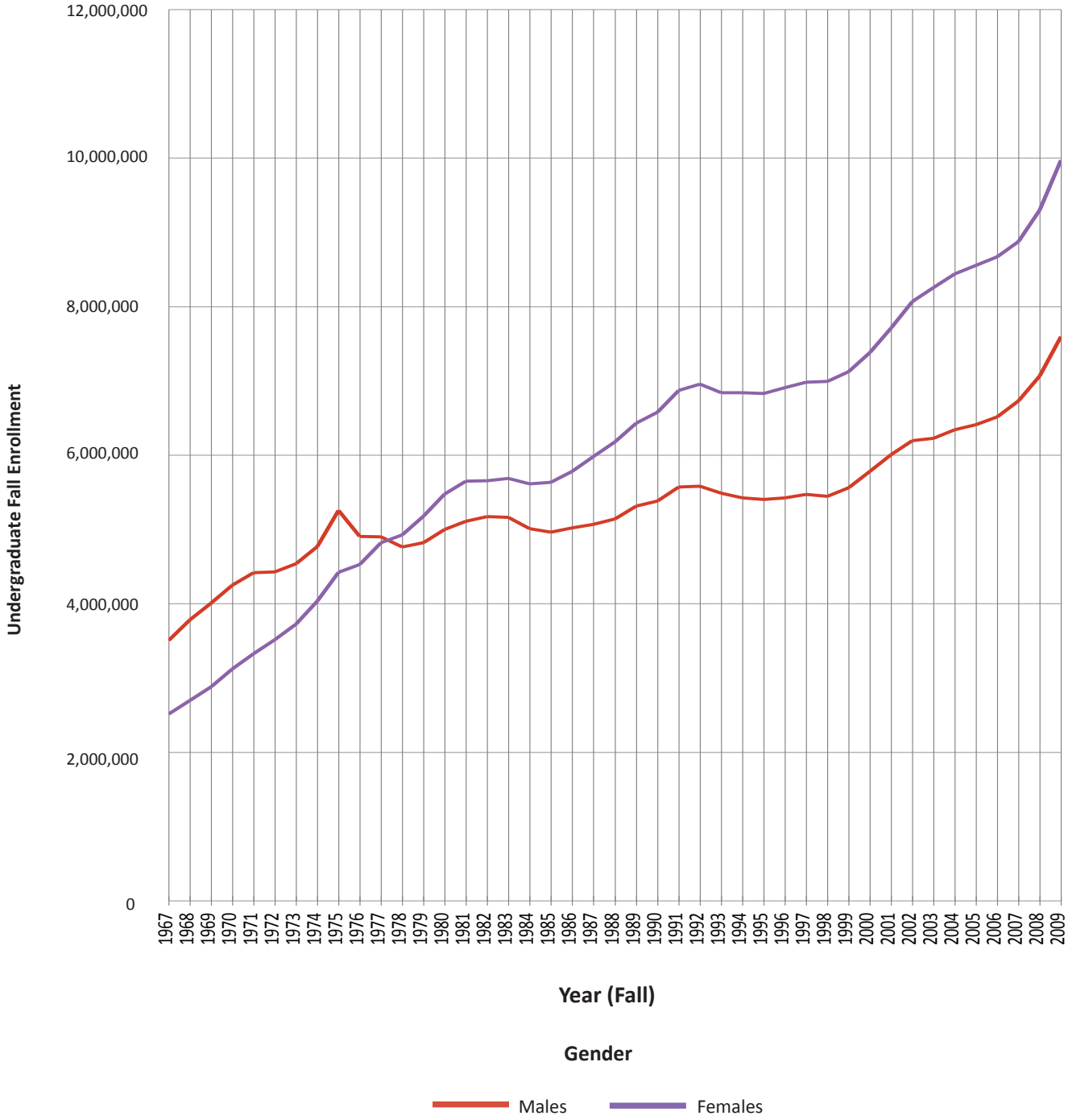
Year (Fall)	Age Group				
	Under 18	18–24	25–34	35–49	50+
1993	87,206	2,817,854	1,373,500	959,270	174,413
1995	165,831	2,519,560	1,331,997	1,037,781	251,421
1997	210,908	2,601,193	1,265,445	1,011,275	275,802
1999	245,098	2,723,307	1,165,575	969,497	288,670
2001	341,457	2,999,947	1,274,368	1,036,567	347,555
2003	344,093	3,663,261	1,445,573	1,094,767	357,696
2005	402,480	3,781,638	1,419,666	1,026,061	356,561
2007	488,009	3,668,993	1,416,268	983,667	370,345
2009	553,573	4,171,251	1,676,121	1,086,888	396,145

Sources: NCES (2011c); Phillippe & Gonzalez Sullivan (2005).

Note. Headcount data for those with an unknown age are not included.

Figure A1

Total Undergraduate Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions, by Gender: Fall 1967 to Fall 2009



Source: Snyder & Dillow (2011).

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