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Transitioning From High School to College in the United States

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Abstract

As in other nations, higher education has many benefits for individual participants and for communities in the United States. But, the opportunity to attain higher education is unequal. To understand the forces that contribute to higher education attainment in the United States, this essay first provides a brief overview of the characteristics of the nation's higher education system. It then discusses the importance of academic preparation, financial resources, and information to college enrollment and success, as well as structural inequality in the availability of these resources. The essay then discusses how particular practices used by colleges and universities in the United States contribute to stratification in the transition from high school to college.

Keywords: higher education attainment, structural inequality, academic preparation, financial aid, information, college admissions practices

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Transitioning From High School to College in the United States

In the United States, the benefits of completing education beyond high school are substantial. On average, individuals who complete college have higher earnings, greater likelihood of employment, reduced likelihood of unemployment, better health, longer lives, and more (Ma et al., 2019).

However, the likelihood of realizing these benefits is unequal. In 2020, about 38% of adults aged 25 and older in the United States held at least a bachelor's degree, up from 30% in 2010 and 26% in 2000 (see Table 1). While this upward trend shows progress, considering only the average masks the variation. In 2020, bachelor's degree attainment ranged from 20% for American Indian/Alaska Natives, 21% for Hispanics, 28% for Blacks, and 29% for Pacific Islanders, to 41% for Whites and 62% for Asians (see Table 1; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Within each racial/ethnic group, attainment varies based on sex, parents' education, family income, and other background and sociocultural characteristics.

These and other observed differences are attributable not to inherent differences among people with different demographic characteristics (Gillborn et al., 2018). Rather, these differences are attributable to systematic and structural differences in the availability of resources that are required to enroll and succeed in higher education (Perna, 2006). Three resources are especially important to college enrollment and success: academic preparation, financial resources, and information. But, the availability of these resources varies based on where a student lives and the schools they attend. College attendance rates are positively related to college attendance rates of the neighborhood in which a child lives, even after controlling for family characteristics (Chetty & Hendren, 2017).

In the United States, the 50 states, not the federal government, have the primary responsibility for educating their residents. Each state has established its own approach to providing education at the K-12 and higher education levels (Perna & Finney, 2014). States also vary in how they help students pay college costs. States differ in dollars appropriated to higher education institutions, dollars allocated to grant-based financial aid, and requirements for receiving available state-sponsored grant aid (Perna & Finney, 2014). They also differ in how they facilitate the academic transition of students from high school to higher education (see Education Commission of the States, n.d., for example). As a result, it is not surprising that higher education attainment rates vary across states. In 2019 only 22% of adults aged 25 and older in two states (West Virginia and Mississippi) had at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 45% of adults in Massachusetts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021, Table 104.80).

This essay provides a brief overview of the characteristics of the U.S. higher education system. It then discusses the importance of academic preparation, financial resources, and information to college enrollment and success, as well as structural inequality in the availability of these resources. The essay then discusses the implications of five

Table 1. Percentage of Adults Aged 25 and Over With at Least a Bachelor's Degree by Race/Ethnicity: 2000 to 2020

Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Pacific Islander	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Two or More Races
2000	26%	28%	17%	11%	—	—	—	—
2001	26%	29%	16%	11%	—	—	—	—
2002	27%	29%	17%	11%	—	—	—	—
2003	27%	30%	17%	11%	50%	27%	13%	22%
2004	28%	31%	18%	12%	50%	32%	14%	22%
2005	28%	31%	18%	12%	50%	25%	15%	23%
2006	28%	31%	19%	12%	50%	27%	13%	23%
2007	29%	32%	19%	13%	52%	24%	13%	24%
2008	29%	33%	20%	13%	53%	28%	15%	24%
2009	30%	33%	19%	13%	53%	28%	18%	26%
2010	30%	33%	20%	14%	53%	26%	16%	25%
2011	30%	34%	20%	14%	51%	22%	16%	27%
2012	31%	34%	21%	15%	52%	25%	17%	27%
2013	32%	35%	22%	15%	54%	26%	15%	31%
2014	32%	36%	23%	15%	53%	22%	14%	31%
2015	33%	36%	23%	15%	54%	23%	20%	31%
2016	33%	37%	23%	16%	56%	27%	17%	31%
2017	34%	38%	24%	17%	55%	25%	21%	33%
2018	35%	39%	26%	18%	57%	24%	19%	32%
2019	36%	40%	26%	19%	59%	28%	17%	34%
2020	38%	41%	28%	21%	62%	29%	20%	35%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2021), Table 104.10.

practices used by colleges and universities for continued stratification in the transition from high school to college.

Characteristics of the U.S. Higher Education System

With nearly 4,000 degree-granting institutions in the United States in 2019, there is seemingly an option for anyone with interest in enrolling. Undergraduates most commonly attend a public four-year institution (46% of the more than 16.5 million

undergraduates enrolled in fall 2019) or public two-year institution (33% of all undergraduates). Table 2 shows that, although 39% of all degree-granting institutions in the United States in 2019 were private, not-for-profit, four-year institutions, these institutions enrolled just 17% of all undergraduates that year. While 18% of all degree-granting institutions were two- or four-year for-profit institutions, these institutions enrolled 5% of all undergraduates in fall 2019 (Cahalan et al., 2022).

Geographic proximity to a postsecondary education institution is positively related to the likelihood of attendance, but geographic access to higher education options varies (Hillman, 2019). Most undergraduates attend colleges or universities that are 25 to 50 miles from their home, but about 10% of the U.S. population lives in an "education desert," defined as a commuting zone with no or one public college or university that admits at least 80% of applicants (Hillman, 2019).

Much attention focuses on the small number of institutions with the lowest admission rates. In fall 2019, 5% of all degree-granting institutions were designated as the "most" or "highly" competitive by Barron's Selectivity Index, an index that reflects acceptance rates and other measures of admission competitiveness. These 200 institutions enrolled 11% of the nation's undergraduates that year (see Table 3; Cahalan et al., 2022). In contrast, public and private not-for-profit two-year colleges (23% of degree-granting institutions) and some four-year colleges have "open admissions," meaning that the only academic requirement for admission is a high school diploma or the equivalent. In 2019, about 30% of all undergraduates were enrolled in public and private not-for-profit two-year institutions and 21% were enrolled in non-ranked, non-competitive, and less-competitive four-year institutions (see Table 3; Cahalan et al., 2022).

The institution a student attends is important, as institutional completion rates vary. Table 4 shows that college completion rates, on average, decline as institutional

Table 2. Distribution of Degree-Granting Institutions and Undergraduate Enrollment in the United States by Institutional Control and Level: 2019

	Institutions	Undergraduate enrollment
Total number	3,892	16,565,066
Percent distribution	100%	100%
Public 2-year	21%	33%
Private not-for-profit 2-year	2%	0%
Private for-profit 2-year	9%	1%
Public 4-year	19%	46%
Private not-for-profit 4-year	39%	17%
Private for-profit 4-year	9%	4%

Source: Cahalan et al. (2022) and National Center for Education Statistics (2021), Table 317.10.

selectivity increases. About 86% of students who first enrolled full-time in 2013 at a public four-year institution that admits fewer than 25% of applicants completed a bachelor's degree at that initial institution within six years, compared with just 29% of students who first enrolled at a public institution that is open admission (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Table 3. Distribution of Degree-Granting Institutions and Undergraduate Enrollment in the United States by Institutional Competitiveness: 2019

	Institutions	Undergraduate enrollment
Total number	3,892	16,565,066
Percent distribution	100%	100%
Most competitive	3%	6%
Highly competitive	2%	5%
Very competitive	6%	10%
Competitive	16%	23%
Less competitive	5%	6%
Noncompetitive	1%	1%
Special	1%	1%
4-year, not ranked	26%	14%
2-year	23%	30%
2- and 4-year for-profit	18%	5%

Source: Cahalan et al. (2022).

Table 4. Percent of Full-Time Bachelor's Degree-Seeking Students who First Enrolled Full-Time at a 4-Year Postsecondary Institution in Fall 2013 who Earned a Bachelor's Degree From the Institution at Which They First Enrolled Within Six Years of Entry by Institutional Control and Percent of Applications Accepted

Institutional control	Public	Private nonprofit	For-profit
Total	62%	68%	26%
Open admissions	29%	30%	26%
90 percent or more accepted	51%	53%	41%
75.0 to 89.9 percent accepted	58%	64%	33%
50.0 to 74.9 percent accepted	65%	64%	45%
25.0 to 49.9 percent accepted	71%	77%	61%
Less than 25.0 percent accepted	86%	90%	—

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2021), Table 326.15.

Students who attend the nation's most selective institutions realize other benefits. The average earnings premium four and 10 years after graduation has been shown to increase with institutional selectivity even after accounting for selection bias (Witteveen & Attewell, 2017). The net price of attendance for low-income students may be lower at the most selective institutions than at other four-year institutions, as these institutions more commonly have the financial resources to meet 100% of a student's financial need with grants. Educational spending per student is also typically higher at the most selective institutions (Hillman, 2020).

Yet, the representation of students from low-income and other marginalized groups decreases as institutional competitiveness increases, a pattern that has remained virtually unchanged over the past two decades (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cahalan et al., 2022). Table 5 shows that, in 2019, students who received Pell or other Federal grants (a proxy for low-income) represented 24% of first-time, full-time undergraduate students at the nation's most competitive institutions (e.g., Harvard University, Northwestern University), compared with 36% of first-time, full-time undergraduates at highly competitive institutions (e.g., Pennsylvania State University, University of Wisconsin), 44% at very competitive institutions (e.g., Indiana University, Purdue University), 55% at competitive institutions (e.g., San Diego State University), and 66% at noncompetitive institutions (e.g., University of Toledo; Cahalan et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2011).

Also important is recognizing the disproportionate role of private for-profit institutions in enrolling students from disadvantaged groups. In 2019, 75% of first-time, full-time undergraduates at for-profit institutions received Pell or other Federal grants (see Table 5; Cahalan et al., 2022). While these institutions appear to provide access to low-income students, completion rates are low, as only 26% of students who first enrolled

Table 5. Average Percent of Full-Time, First-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduates who Were Awarded Pell or Other Federal Grants: 2019–20

Institutional competitiveness	Percent
Most competitive	24%
Highly competitive	36%
Very competitive	44%
Competitive	55%
Less competitive	68%
Noncompetitive	66%
Special	43%
4-year, not ranked	65%
2-year	64%
Private for-profit	75%

Source: Cahalan et al. (2022), Figure 2e.

in a four-year for-profit institution in fall 2013 completed a bachelor's degree within six years (see Table 4). Rates of borrowing and average amounts of student loan debt are also higher for students who earn bachelor's degrees from for-profit institutions than for students who earn degrees from public and private not-for-profit institutions (Cahalan et al., 2022).

Structural Inequity in the Resources Required for Higher Education

To enroll and succeed in higher education in the United States, students need the academic preparation to meet admissions requirements and complete college-level work as well as the financial resources to pay the costs of attending. With the many available higher education options and complexity of determining college costs, students and their families also need information to identify the best colleges for them and whether and how they can pay the costs. Whether students have the required academic preparation, financial resources, and information varies based on characteristics of a student's family (including income, wealth, parents' education), the neighborhoods where students live, and the K-12 schools they attend (Chetty & Hendren, 2017; Perna, 2006).

Academic Preparation

As measured by the need to first complete developmental or remedial coursework before beginning college-level work, many students in the United States graduate from high school without adequate academic preparation. In 2015–16, 56% of undergraduates enrolled in public two-year institutions, 31% of undergraduates at public four-year institutions, and 23% of undergraduates at private four-year institutions had taken at least one remedial course since graduating from high school (Campbell & Wescott, 2019).

Students from groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education, on average, receive lower levels of academic preparation for college. In 2015–16, remedial course-taking rates were higher for Black (48%) and Hispanic (47%) undergraduates than for White undergraduates (34%), and higher for undergraduates in the lowest family income quartile (45%) than the highest family income quartile (31%; Campbell & Wescott, 2019). Despite policies and practices intended to reform developmental education, college completion rates continue to be lower for students who require developmental coursework (Parker, n.d.).

The academic rigor of the courses that students can take prior to enrolling in college varies based on the high school a student attends. High schools that serve high shares of students from low-income and racially minoritized groups typically offer fewer advanced courses, defined as courses that may qualify for academic credit from both a high school and college, such as Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, and International Baccalaureate courses (Chatterji et al., 2021). In the 2015–16 school

year, about 35% of Indigenous students attended a public high school that offered no Advanced Placement courses, compared with 15% of all public high school students. Even when Advanced Placement courses are available, students from racial/ethnic minoritized groups are less likely to be enrolled in those courses and less likely to take and pass the exam (Chatterji et al., 2021). Other research shows that, while the availability of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in schools serving low-income and Hispanic students has increased over time, the percentages of low-income and Hispanic students participating have remained relatively unchanged (Perna et al., 2015).

Financial Resources

To enroll and stay in enrolled in college, students in the United States need the financial resources to pay the costs. Costs begin before a student enrolls, as students may need to pay to take admissions tests, submit a college application, visit a college before applying, and engage in other college-preparatory activities. Waivers for some fees may be available for students who are aware of the waivers and meet eligibility criteria. Students from affluent families also often allocate additional financial resources with the goal of further improving the competitiveness of their admissions application, spending personal financial resources on test preparation, essay coaching, and private college counseling.

In the United States, colleges and universities set their own tuition and required fees. Other costs of attendance include room and board, books and supplies, personal expenses, and transportation, all of which may vary based on whether a student attends full- or part-time; lives in a dormitory on campus, in an apartment off campus or with their parents; chooses particular major fields of study; and has other needs that must be met in order to attend classes (e.g., childcare, transportation).

For many undergraduate students, the sticker price is reduced by some amount of grant aid (i.e., money that does not have to be repaid). In 2021–22, 30% of undergraduates received a Federal Pell Grant, the primary form of grant aid for college provided by the federal government (College Board, 2022). The maximum amount is federally legislated ($6,895 in 2022–23). Over time, average costs of attendance have increased faster than the maximum Pell Grant, reducing the purchasing power of the Pell Grant (Cahalan et al., 2022). The maximum Pell Grant covered 30% of average published tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year institutions and 13% of these costs at private four-year institutions in 2022–23 (College Board, 2022).

Pell Grants are awarded based on a student's financial need as determined by a federal formula. State governments, as well as individual colleges and universities, may also provide students with some amount of grant aid based on criteria that they define. Even when available, however, the total amount of grants a student receives is often less than the student's financial need, defined as the cost of attendance less the federally-defined expected family contribution. In 2015–16, full-time students who

were financially dependent on their parents and who were in the lowest family income quartile had, on average, $9,859 in unmet financial need for that year; students in the second lowest family income quartile averaged $8,265 in unmet need (Cahalan et al., 2022).

One of the few options available to pay costs that are not covered by grants and personal financial resources is to borrow. On average, students from low-income families and Black students are more likely to use student loans to pay college costs, and they average higher amounts of student loan debt than other students (Cahalan et al., 2022). The need to borrow to pay college costs reduces the financial benefits of attending college, contributes to the large and persisting gaps in wealth between groups, and can have other negative implications for longer-term financial well-being (Cahalan et al., 2022).

With variation across institutions in the cost of attendance and availability of grant aid, as well as the complexity of the federal formula for determining a student's financial need, it is difficult for students and their families to know what their out-of-pocket cost will be at a particular college or university until after they apply for admission, are admitted, complete the federal financial aid application, and receive a financial aid offer letter. With the goal of providing early information about college costs, the federal government requires colleges and universities that award federal financial aid to have a "net price calculator" on their websites. Nonetheless, not all institutions are in compliance with this requirement. Even when available, the net price calculator may not provide accurate, current, and complete information (Perna et al., 2021).

Information

One of the strengths of the U.S. higher education system is the number and variety of options. Yet, with the number and diversity of options comes the challenge of identifying the college that best fits a student's interests and that they can afford to attend. School counselors can provide assistance and may be especially important for students from families with no prior direct experience with higher education. The availability of counselors to assist students with college-related questions varies. In 2018–19, the number of students per counselor averaged 263 and increased with school enrollment, from 203 students per counselor at schools with fewer than 500 students to 375 students per counselor at schools with more than 2,000 students (Clinedinst, 2019). In several U.S. states, the average number of students per counselor exceeded 650 in 2018–19 (e.g., Minnesota, Illinois, California, Michigan, and Arizona; Clinedinst, 2019).

Even when available, counselors typically have many responsibilities other than providing college-related counseling, including course scheduling, personal counseling, testing, and occupational/career counseling. On average, counselors report spending 20% of their time on postsecondary admissions (Clinedinst, 2019). Time on postsecondary admission counseling declines as total enrollment, percent of low-income students, and number of students per counselor increase (Clinedinst, 2019).

Practices that Limit and Promote Equity in Enrollment

Colleges and universities in the United States establish their own admissions practices. These practices may be designed to achieve multiple goals, including increasing the academic profile of enrolled students and meeting institutional enrollment and tuition revenue targets (Bussey et al., 2021). Space limitations prevent attention to all the policies and practices that can limit and promote the transition to college from high school for students from underserved groups. This section describes five practices to illustrate the types of actions that can influence inequity.

Early decision is a practice that persists despite clear evidence that it advantages students who are already advantaged. Although research suggests that race conscious admissions increases racial/ethnic diversity in college enrollment (Baker, 2019), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on June 29, 2023 that colleges and universities may no longer consider race in admissions processes. By recognizing structural differences in resources that promote traditional measures of academic preparation for college, test-optional and holistic admissions policies have the potential to improve opportunity. Even if they improve the likelihood of admission to a selective college or university, however, these practices alone are likely insufficient, as students may still have difficulty paying the costs of attendance (Mabel et al., 2022). As such, continued effort to reduce the net price of attendance through need-based grants is essential.

Early Decision

Under early decision, students submit their application before the regular admissions deadline (often in fall of senior year) and commit to attending the institution if they are admitted. According to the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (Clinedinst, 2019), 56% of four-year institutions that admit fewer than 50% of first-time, first-year applicants used early decision in 2019.

From an institutional perspective, having early information on the number of students who will enroll may help address other institutional pressures (Clinedinst, 2019). Yet, the disadvantages of early decision for students from disadvantaged groups are well documented (Bussey et al., 2021). Admissions rates at the most selective institutions are typically higher for students who apply under early decision than regular admission (Castro, 2019). But, to use early decision, students must know the institution they want to attend and they must be able to commit to enrolling without knowing how much financial aid they will receive. As discussed earlier, students from low-income families and other marginalized groups are less likely to have needed information and are more likely to require financial assistance to pay college costs.

Race Conscious Admissions

One strategy for increasing the racial/ethnic diversity of college enrollments is for colleges and universities to consider race in admissions decisions. Although the U.S.

Supreme Court ruled in 1978 (in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*) and 2003 (in *Grutter v. Bollinger*) that colleges and universities may consider race as one factor, the Supreme Court (2023, June 29) ruled that, by considering race, the admissions systems used by Harvard and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

With the Supreme Court's ruling, colleges and universities may no longer consider race in admissions processes. Among the suggested alternative strategies are adding preferences for students from low-income families, are first in their families to attend college, and have low family wealth; eliminating preferences for children of alumni and faculty; increasing the number of students who are admitted after first attending a community college; and increasing institutional need-based grant aid (Kahlenberg & Brittain, 2022).

While these and other strategies may help increase the diversity of enrolled students, available research shows that banning the consideration of race will reduce the representation of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic minoritized groups at the nation's most selective universities (Baker, 2019). For example, in 2006 Michigan voters prohibited public colleges and universities in the state from considering race in admissions. The University of Michigan has since advanced a multifaceted approach to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion, with investments in a new multicultural center, academic and social supports for students and schools in four underserved Michigan communities, free tuition for Michigan students with annual family incomes at or below $65,000, and other initiatives (Mangan, 2023). While these efforts are important, Black students continue to be underrepresented at the University relative to their representation in the state population (4% versus 14%; Mangan, 2023).

Test-Optional and Test-Free Admissions Requirements

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of four-year colleges and universities reported requiring the SAT or ACT as part of admissions applications (Bussey et al., 2021; Clinedinst, 2019). Following COVID-related disruptions to SAT and ACT testing, the number of colleges and universities adopting test-optional policies increased (Camara & Mattern, 2022), with more than 800 institutions making tests optional between fall 2019 and fall 2021 (Elias, 2022). Fewer students took admissions tests, retook tests, and included test scores in their college applications in 2021 than 2020 (Camara & Mattern, 2022).

Although some point to test scores as a fair and objective measure of academic qualifications, using test scores maintains inequality based on socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (Alvero et al., 2021; Smith & Reeves, 2020). Requiring standardized tests ignores structural inequality in the opportunity to prepare for tests, as students from disadvantaged groups have fewer resources to pay the costs to take and retake tests and receive out-of-school test preparation and have less access to other academic enrichment opportunities (Bussey et al., 2021). Test scores also have questionable predictive

validity for college performance, especially for females and students from racial/ethnic minoritized groups (Bennett, 2022; Fair Test, n.d.).

Test-optional policies may increase applications but may have limited effect on the overall diversity of undergraduate enrollments, at least in the short term (Rodriguez & Camacho, 2022; Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019). Research examining the effects of eliminating test score requirements before the COVID-19 pandemic found that, relative to a matched comparison group, adopting test-optional admissions policies increased first-time, first-year enrollment rates by 3%–4% for Pell Grant recipients, 10%–12% for students from racial/ethnic minoritized groups, and 6%–8% for women (Bennett, 2022). These increased enrollment rates occurred at both the most- and relatively less-selective private institutions in the analyses. While noteworthy, however, these rates translate into only about a one percentage point increase in the representation of each of these groups among enrolled students, given their currently low levels of representation (Bennett, 2022).

Holistic Review

Holistic review is intended to recognize the structural advantages and disadvantages that can influence an applicant's academic profile, engagement in extracurricular activities, and other aspects of an application. Although most college admissions representatives assert using holistic review, approaches vary (Bastedo et al., 2018). Some review the "whole file," considering all information without systematically prioritizing any particular information. Others emphasize the "whole person," evaluating academic achievements in light of personal characteristics. Still others operationalize holistic review as "whole context," with the goal of considering all information in an application relative to "opportunities available in their families, neighborhoods, or high schools" (Bastedo et al., 2018, p. 793).

Providing information about the high school context has been found to increase the likelihood that a college admissions officer will recommend admitting a low socioeconomic status applicant (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). The College Board (the organization that owns the SAT test) is seeking to systematically provide contextual information for all applications through a new "landscape" tool (Mabel et al., 2022). The tool provides information about academic resources available at the high school attended, an applicant's SAT or ACT score relative to other students at the same high school, and an applicant's predicted college achievement. Preliminary data suggest that this tool increases the likelihood of admission for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds (Mabel et al., 2022).

Need-Based Grant Aid

To enroll and stay enrolled, students need the financial resources to pay the costs. While the Federal Pell Grant is targeted to students with financial need, state governments and colleges and universities award grant aid based on criteria that they define.

A small number of selective colleges and universities have committed to meeting 100% of all students' financial need (as defined by the federal formula) with grants (thereby reducing the need to use loans to pay college costs). Only institutions with relatively large endowments and relatively small numbers of low-income students have the institutional resources to adopt this approach (Perna et al., 2011).

Some colleges and universities are using institutional grant dollars to achieve institutional goals other than reducing financial barriers to college attendance for low-income students, including enrolling more high-paying students. Both need- and merit-based grants have been found to be positively related to college enrollment and other college-related outcomes (LaSota et al., 2023). But, by definition, grants that are awarded based on financial need promote equity, as they are received by students from lower-income families. Grants that are awarded based on merit increase inequity, given the positive relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Rodríguez-Hernández et al., 2020). Allocating resources to ensuring that all students have the financial resources to pay college costs is an important strategy for increasing equity in college enrollment and completion.

Conclusion

Although the United States has many degree-granting higher education institutions, students from disadvantaged groups are less likely to complete bachelor's degrees and are especially underrepresented at the nation's most selective colleges and universities. No one strategy will eliminate stratification in college enrollment and completion. A comprehensive approach is needed, with attention to the multiple forces that determine students' academic preparation, financial resources, and information. Also needed is ongoing critique of how particular policies and practices perpetuate systemic inequality, and continued engagement to advance policies and practices that create meaningful improvements in equity.

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