



# Demographic Perfect Storm

## New England Confronts a Shortage of College-Bound Students

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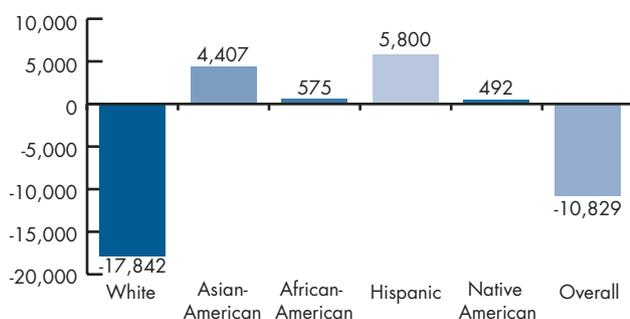
**B**ack in 1978 when I was a young lobbyist in Washington, D.C., I vividly remember seeing a presentation about the demographic change that would reshape the United States over the following 25 years. Whites would no longer make up the majority of the population. The speaker talked of a “minority majority.” The changes that were forecast were dramatic but not imminent, so the talk received very little attention. Now, 25 years later, demographic projections still don’t draw much attention. But they should, especially from presidents and trustees of New England colleges, whose admissions offices are confronting a series of factors that constitute a demographic *perfect storm*.

What are these factors?

The total number of students graduating from New England high schools will decline by almost 11,000 between now and 2018—a drop of 7 percent. The number of white students graduating from the region’s high schools will plunge by 18,000, while the number of students of color graduating will grow by more than 11,000. (See Figure 1.) But these students of color have lower college-going rates than their disappearing white peers.

Nationally, only about 40 percent of African-American high school graduates and 34 percent of Hispanic graduates, age 18 to 24, enroll in college,

**Figure 1: Change in Number of New England High School Graduates from 2006 to 2018**



Source: *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State, Income and Race/Ethnicity*; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, December 2003.

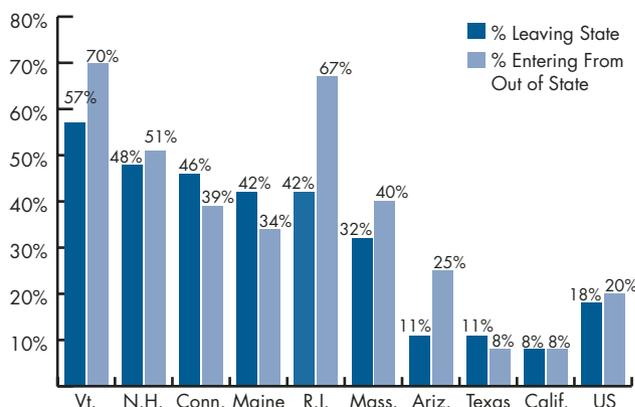
compared with 46 percent of white high school graduates, according to a recent report by the American Council on Education.

Moreover, among boys, particularly those whose families make under \$50,000, high school graduation rates are likely to decline along with total numbers of graduates. According to the most recent data, just 55 percent of ninth-grade boys will graduate from high school three years later.

New England colleges and universities therefore need to focus their recruitment strategies on increasing college participation among New England Hispanics and African-Americans, while hanging on to the New England Asian-American and white students who are also being recruited by other states. And they need to increase their market share of students from outside the Northeast.

New England colleges can target their admissions efforts to states outside the Northeast where population increases are projected. But these states have significantly lower college-going rates than New England, and students from those states who do go on to pursue higher education may be more likely than their New England counterparts to go to colleges in their home states. Only about 8 percent of California students and 11 percent of Texas students leave their states for college, compared with 32 percent of Massachusetts students and 46 percent of Connecticut students. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2: Freshman Migration: Percentage Leaving State to Start College and Percentage Entering State from Elsewhere to Start College**



Source: *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 2004.

## Gender Gap

With headlines like “Where are the boys?,” interest and concern about the particular plight of boys is beginning to catch the attention of college and university administrators across the country. But there is also a fear that expressing concern for young men will be viewed as anti-female. At a recent New England meeting of the College Board, at least two speakers felt they needed to apologize for bringing up the issue of the declining numbers of males who are graduating from high school and going on to college.

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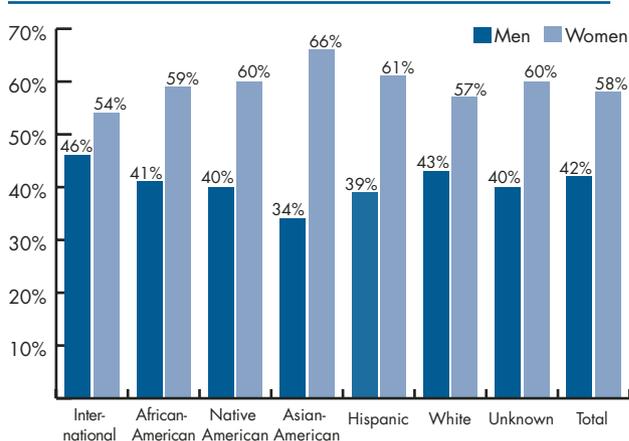
Meanwhile, women have been incredibly successful in gaining access to higher education, and now comprise a majority of the traditional undergraduate population at colleges and universities across the country. Of particular note is growth in the number of women of color in the college population—particularly relative to male students of color. At liberal arts colleges, women account for nearly six out of 10 students and an even higher share of students of color. (See Figure 3.)

Women are more likely than men to complete a high school curriculum that prepares them for college and those who do finish high school continue on to college at significantly higher rates than men (70 percent vs. 60 percent) and graduate from college at higher rates as well.

Women now receive well over half of the bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded in New England, half the first-professional degrees and nearly half the doctorates.

Differing college-going rates among racial and ethnic groups will also be a critical factor in shaping New England higher education. Whites and Asian-Americans are much more likely to attend college than African-Americans and Hispanics. Asian-Americans have the highest college continuation rates of all groups and their overall numbers are projected to increase, but not enough to make up for the large decline in white students.

**Figure 3: Enrollment at Liberal Arts Colleges**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey, 2003.

Increasingly, states have begun to discuss strategies for increasing the number of out-of-state students. There are several reasons for these actions.

Aging populations mean fewer college-age students. Some states like Vermont have declining birth rates and also export large numbers of young people; six in 10 Vermonters leave their home state for college.

One result of having fewer in-state students to draw from is that pressure will build to provide full merit-based scholarships for the top students in the state. The experience of the Georgia Hope Scholarship Program suggests that when merit-based aid increased, increases were funded from cuts to need-based programs. Higher education funding is mostly a zero-sum game. (Note the Bush administration’s proposal to increase the maximum Pell Grant in part by eliminating Perkins loans.)

Will we now begin to pay attention to the fact that we are heading down a road where educated women will greatly outnumber men? And that there aren’t enough high school graduates to sustain current levels of enrollment in higher education institutions? And that the competition to attract our best and brightest students is going to intensify?

If we don’t begin to have serious conversations about these three topics, New England higher education institutions will suffer significant losses in enrollment and some will go out of business.

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