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Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Institutions: 1999–2000

Statistical Analysis Report

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Postsecondary education in the United States encompasses a wide array of educational opportunities and programs. U.S. undergraduates attend postsecondary institutions that range from 4-year colleges and universities offering programs leading to baccalaureate and higher degrees to private for-profit vocational institutions offering occupational training of less than 1 year. This report provides a detailed statistical overview of the approximately 16.5 million undergraduates enrolled in all U.S. postsecondary institutions in 1999–2000. Preceding the detailed statistical tables is a discussion of the undergraduate population’s diversity and the possible impact of this diversity on persistence in postsecondary education.

This report is based on data from the 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000), a survey representing all students enrolled in postsecondary education in 1999–2000.

Who Were 1999–2000 Undergraduates?

Taking into account enrollments at all U.S. postsecondary institutions, women comprised 56 percent of undergraduates in 1999–2000 (figure A). Minority students represented about one-third of the total undergraduate population, including 12 percent Black, 11 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian.¹ Roughly 2 percent of undergraduates

were either American Indian/Alaska Natives (0.9 percent) or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders (0.8 percent). And about 2 percent indicated that they were of more than one race.

Among Hispanic undergraduates, Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano students made up the largest group (55 percent versus 4 to 27 percent for other Hispanic groups). Among Asian undergraduates, Chinese students made up the largest group (25 percent versus 3 to 13 percent for other Asian groups).

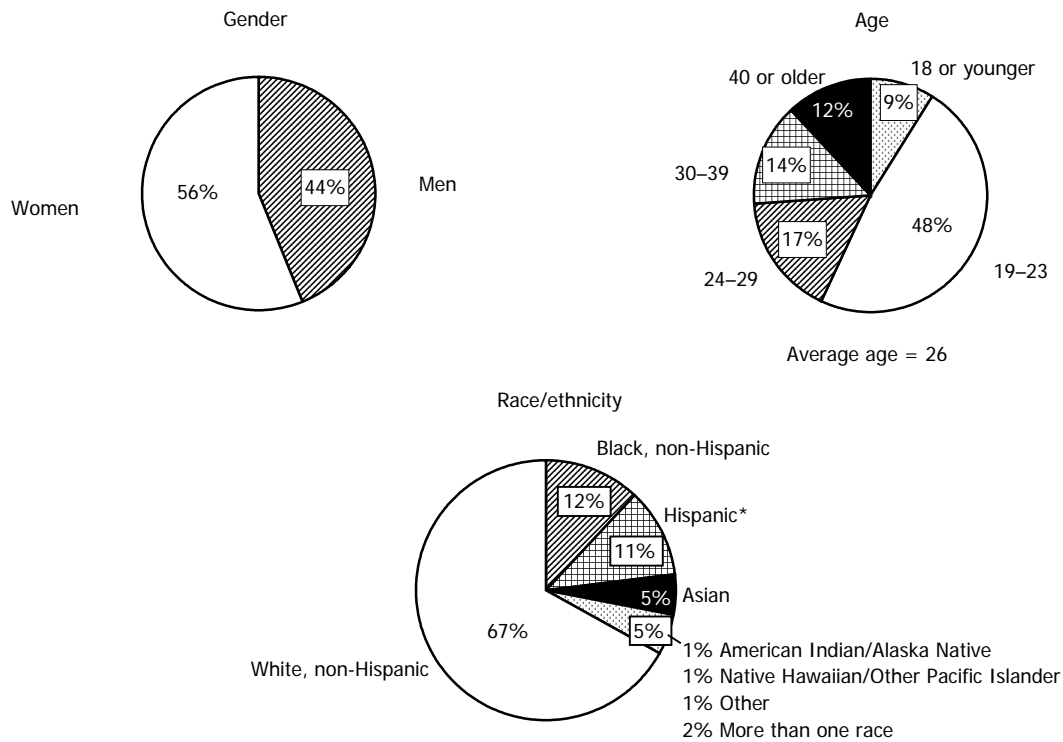
While a majority of undergraduates were younger than 24, about one in four were 30 or older. The average age of undergraduates was 26 and the median age was 22.

About 7 percent of undergraduates were not U.S. citizens. Of these noncitizens, 5 percent were permanent residents, and 2 percent were foreign students. Undergraduates who were born in another country, immigrated to the United States, and became citizens comprised 4 percent of undergraduates (figure B). One in ten undergraduates were born in the United States but had at least one foreign-born parent. In addition, 13 percent of undergraduates spoke a language other than English in the home while growing up.

¹Census categories for race and ethnicity were used in the NPSAS survey, which included the terms “Black or African

American” and “Hispanic or Latino.” By convention, the terms Black and Hispanic are used in the text. Unless otherwise noted, when discussing race, Black and White estimates do not include individuals of Hispanic ethnicity.

Figure A.—Percentage distributions of 1999–2000 undergraduates, by gender, age, and race/ethnicity



*Priority was given to Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race chosen.

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Students who were parents made up 27 percent of undergraduates,² including 13 percent who were single parents.³ While women were more likely to be single parents (16 percent), 9 percent of unmarried men also reported having dependents.

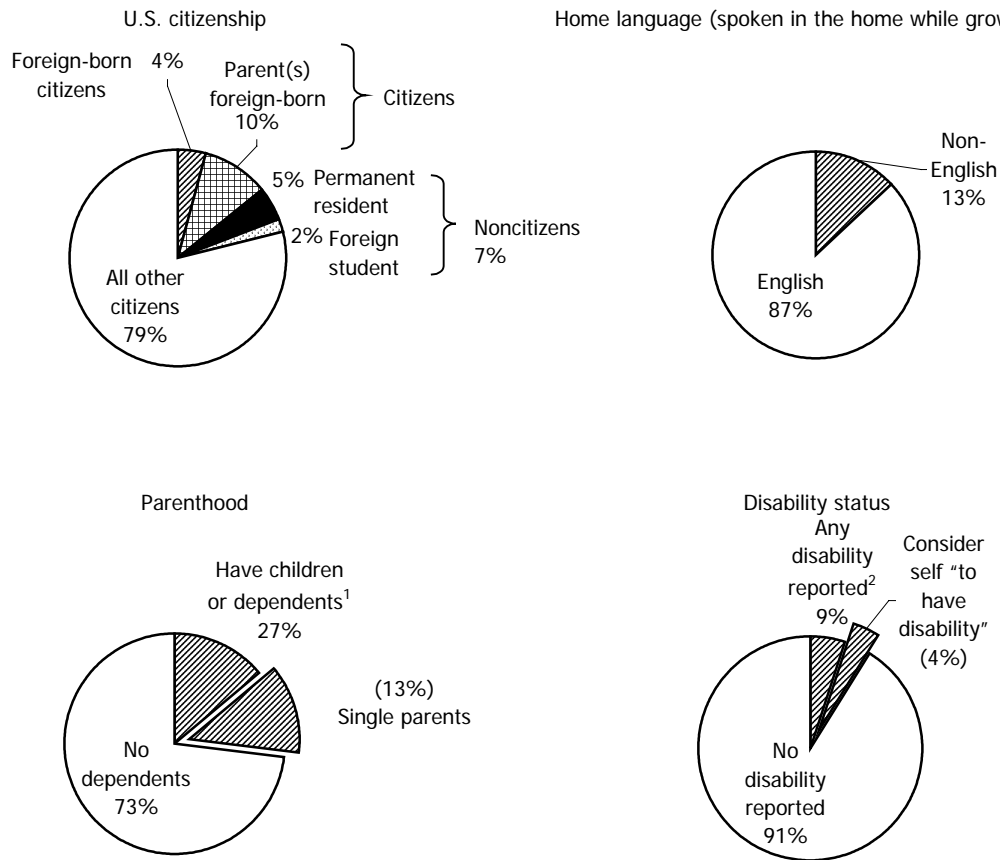
When asked to report on a series of disabling conditions or difficulties with basic physical activities, 9 percent of undergraduates reported having some such condition or difficulty.⁴ However, when asked specifically, “Do you consider your-

²This is the percentage of financially independent undergraduates who reported having dependents other than a spouse. Therefore, it includes a small number of students having dependents other than children (3.7 percent), such as elderly parents or relatives whom they support.

³Identified as financially independent students who were not married (including divorced or separated students) and who reported having dependents other than a spouse.

⁴Includes students who reported having a “long-lasting” condition such as blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment; who reported having a condition that limits “one or more of the basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying”; or who reported having any other physical, mental, or emotional condition that lasted 6 or more months and difficulty doing one of the following five activities: getting to school, getting around campus, learning, dressing, or working at a job.

Figure B.—Percentage distributions of 1999–2000 undergraduates, by citizenship, home language, parenthood, and disability status



¹Dependents do not include spouse.

²Includes students who reported having a “long-lasting” condition such as blindness, deafness, a severe vision or hearing impairment, a condition that limits “one or more of the basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying” or who responded they had any other physical, mental, or emotional condition that lasted six or more months and who had difficulty doing one of the following five activities: getting to school, getting around campus, learning, dressing, or working at a job. Does not include an additional 2 percent who responded “yes” to the questions about conditions lasting 6 or more months, but did not report a specific difficulty with one of the five listed activities.

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Estimates include a small percentage of students in Puerto Rico.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

self to have a disability?” the proportion who responded “yes” was considerably lower (4 percent).

Where Undergraduates Enroll and What They Study

In 1999–2000, where undergraduates were enrolled and how much time they spent in the classroom was related to their age and life

circumstances (table A). Older undergraduates, who are more likely to have family and work responsibilities, were concentrated in public 2-year colleges (often called “community colleges”) and

they were very likely to attend on a part-time basis. Younger undergraduates were more likely to be enrolled in 4-year institutions and to attend full time. For example, 56 percent of undergraduates

Table A.—Percentage of 1999–2000 undergraduates attending selected types of institutions, and percentage distribution of undergraduates attending full time and part time

| Student characteristics | Institution attended | | | Attendance status | | |
|--|--|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | 4-year public and private not-for-profit | Public 2-year | Private for-profit | Exclusively full-time | Mixed full-time and part-time | Exclusively part-time |
| Total | 45.4 | 42.1 | 4.9 | 49.3 | 16.3 | 34.5 |
| Gender | | | | | | |
| Male | 46.4 | 42.1 | 4.5 | 50.1 | 15.9 | 34.0 |
| Female | 44.6 | 42.2 | 5.2 | 48.6 | 16.6 | 34.9 |
| Race/ethnicity | | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 47.5 | 41.3 | 3.8 | 49.5 | 16.2 | 34.4 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 39.3 | 44.4 | 7.8 | 49.6 | 15.1 | 35.3 |
| Hispanic* | 39.9 | 44.7 | 8.5 | 47.0 | 16.2 | 36.8 |
| Asian | 48.3 | 39.0 | 4.3 | 51.4 | 19.3 | 29.3 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 35.1 | 53.4 | 2.9 | 44.2 | 18.6 | 37.3 |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | 39.6 | 46.9 | 5.6 | 46.3 | 17.3 | 36.4 |
| Other | 42.1 | 40.4 | 4.5 | 53.7 | 17.8 | 28.5 |
| Age | | | | | | |
| 18 or younger | 52.0 | 38.0 | 3.5 | 72.0 | 11.1 | 16.9 |
| 19–23 years | 55.4 | 32.3 | 3.8 | 63.0 | 18.1 | 18.9 |
| 24–29 years | 38.9 | 45.8 | 8.1 | 38.0 | 18.0 | 44.1 |
| 30–39 years | 30.6 | 56.1 | 6.3 | 26.9 | 15.8 | 57.3 |
| 40 years or older | 26.3 | 63.4 | 4.1 | 18.3 | 11.4 | 70.4 |
| Dependent family income in 1998 | | | | | | |
| Less than \$20,000 | 49.3 | 36.1 | 6.1 | 68.4 | 14.5 | 17.1 |
| \$20,000–39,999 | 53.5 | 34.4 | 3.4 | 64.6 | 17.0 | 18.5 |
| \$40,000–59,999 | 56.6 | 33.6 | 2.3 | 65.6 | 17.1 | 17.3 |
| \$60,000–79,999 | 59.0 | 31.1 | 2.1 | 67.0 | 17.5 | 15.5 |
| \$80,000–99,999 | 63.5 | 25.8 | 1.7 | 66.7 | 18.8 | 14.5 |
| \$100,000 or more | 67.3 | 23.2 | 1.0 | 70.5 | 15.5 | 14.0 |

*Priority was given to Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race chosen.

NOTE: Percentages in columns 1–3 do not add to 100 because students in other institution types and those attending more than one institution are not shown. Percentages in columns 4–6 do not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

in their thirties and 63 percent of those 40 or older attended community colleges, while 55 percent of those ages 19 to 23 were enrolled in 4-year institutions. Moreover, 57 percent of undergraduates in their thirties and 70 percent of those 40 or older attended exclusively part time, while 63 percent of those ages 19 to 23 attended exclusively full time.

While women attended postsecondary education in greater numbers than men, no overall differences by gender were detected in the level of institution attended or in part-time or full-time attendance status. For example, 45 percent of women and 46 percent of men attended 4-year institutions (public and private not-for-profit institutions combined).⁵ Across all postsecondary institutions, 50 percent of men and 49 percent of women attended exclusively full time.

Some differences in patterns of enrollment at different types of institutions were found relative to racial/ethnic groups. For example, 39 percent of Black undergraduates attended 4-year institutions, compared with 48 percent of White students.⁶ Black and Hispanic undergraduates were more likely than White undergraduates to attend private for-profit institutions, though the proportions were relatively small (8 percent of Black and 9 percent of Hispanic students, compared with 4 percent of White students).

Where undergraduates enrolled differed by income level. Among dependent undergraduates,⁷ for example, the rate of attending 4-year institutions rose with each successive level of family

income. The opposite pattern occurred for public 2-year institutions: as family income levels rose, the rate of dependent undergraduates who attended public 2-year institutions declined.

Degree Program

The patterns of participation in degree programs paralleled the level of institution undergraduates attended. In particular, those who attended either public 2-year institutions or private for-profit vocational institutions tended to be enrolled in either associate's degree or vocational certificate programs, while those enrolled in 4-year institutions were enrolled almost exclusively in baccalaureate programs.

About 44 percent of undergraduates were in baccalaureate programs, and 38 percent were in associate's degree programs (table B). In addition, 12 percent were working toward a vocational certificate, while 7 percent were not working toward any postsecondary credential.

Older students, who were more concentrated in community colleges, were more likely than their younger counterparts to be working toward an associate's degree. This was particularly true for students in their thirties, among whom 45 percent were in associate's degree programs, compared with 33 percent of students ages 19 to 23. Undergraduates in the oldest age group (40 or older) were more likely than undergraduates overall to be taking courses that were not leading to any degree or certificate (16 percent versus 7 percent).

The relatively short time frame of vocational certificate programs may attract students with limited time. This may have been the case for undergraduates with children (including single parents), 20 percent of whom were enrolled in vocational

⁵Men were slightly more likely than women to attend public 4-year institutions, however (33 versus 31 percent).

⁶While it may also appear that Hispanic undergraduates are less likely than White undergraduates to attend 4-year institutions (40 percent versus 48 percent), there was not enough statistical evidence to draw this conclusion.

⁷Dependent undergraduates are those who are under 24 years old and who are financially dependent on their parents.

Table B.—Percentage distribution of 1999–2000 undergraduates, by undergraduate degree program

| Student characteristics | Certificate | Associate's degree | Bachelor's degree | No undergraduate degree |
|--|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Total | 12.1 | 37.5 | 43.8 | 6.6 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 12.3 | 36.4 | 44.5 | 6.7 |
| Female | 12.0 | 38.4 | 43.2 | 6.5 |
| Race/ethnicity | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 10.4 | 36.7 | 46.2 | 6.7 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 18.2 | 39.8 | 37.2 | 4.8 |
| Hispanic* | 16.5 | 41.0 | 36.3 | 6.3 |
| Asian | 9.6 | 32.1 | 49.2 | 9.1 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 12.8 | 48.6 | 28.5 | 10.2 |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | 14.6 | 39.8 | 38.0 | 7.6 |
| Other | 11.8 | 38.3 | 44.2 | 5.6 |
| Age | | | | |
| 18 or younger | 7.8 | 36.8 | 49.5 | 5.9 |
| 19–23 years | 7.2 | 33.2 | 55.7 | 3.9 |
| 24–29 years | 14.4 | 42.1 | 36.6 | 6.9 |
| 30–39 years | 20.1 | 44.9 | 26.9 | 8.1 |
| 40 years or older | 22.9 | 40.2 | 21.4 | 15.5 |
| Dependents other than spouse | | | | |
| None | 9.2 | 34.7 | 50.1 | 6.0 |
| One or more | 20.1 | 45.3 | 26.5 | 8.1 |
| Single parent | | | | |
| No | 10.9 | 36.2 | 46.4 | 6.5 |
| Yes | 20.1 | 46.0 | 26.7 | 7.2 |

*Priority was given to Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race chosen.

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

certificate programs, compared with 12 percent of undergraduates overall.

Field of Study

Among undergraduates with a declared major (90 percent had declared a major), the largest proportions majored either in business-related fields (19 percent) or arts and humanities (18 percent). Eight to 10 percent majored in each of the fol-

lowing: social and behavioral sciences, computer science, education, health, and other technical or professional fields. No more than 6 percent majored in any other field.

Historically, women have outnumbered men in education and health, while men have outnumbered women in computer science and engineering. The same patterns were found among 1999–2000 undergraduates: 2 percent of women versus

11 percent of men majored in engineering, and 6 percent of women versus 13 percent of men majored in computer and information sciences. In contrast, 11 percent of women versus 4 percent of men majored in education, and 15 percent of women versus 4 percent of men majored in health. In the likelihood of majoring in business, however, no differences were detected between men and women or among racial/ethnic groups.

Age was also related to field of study. Undergraduates who were 30 or older were more likely than those 23 or younger to major in computer science fields and less likely to major in social and behavioral sciences.

Undergraduate Diversity and The Risk of Leaving Postsecondary Education

The 1999–2000 undergraduates were examined with respect to seven risk factors previously found to be negatively associated with persistence and degree attainment (Horn and Premo 1995). The risk factors include: delaying enrollment by a year or more, attending part time, being financially independent (for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid), having children, being a single parent, working full time while enrolled, and being a high school dropout or a GED recipient. These risk factors involve enrollment patterns, family and financial status, and high school graduation status. From this perspective, the risk factors are highly related to characteristics of a diverse undergraduate population as described in this study, and some (such as parenthood) are one and the same.

In 1999–2000, three-quarters of all undergraduates reported at least one risk factor (table C). Overall, the average number of risk factors reported by all undergraduates was 2.2. More risk factors were reported by Black students (2.7), American Indian/Alaska Native students (2.8), and Hispanic students (2.4). The same was found for students with disabilities, who averaged 2.6 risk factors.

Based on their risk profile, parents are at greater risk than other undergraduates (i.e., they are financially independent, have children, and may be single parents). Undergraduates with children or other dependents averaged 4.3 risk factors, and single parents averaged 4.7 risk factors.

Because female undergraduates were more likely than male undergraduates to be parents, they averaged more risk factors (2.3 versus 2.1). However, because men were more likely to work full time, no differences were detected between men and women in their overall likelihood of having at least one risk factor (75 percent).

According to a study of persistence in postsecondary education (Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormick 1996), 64 percent of beginning students with one risk factor persisted in their postsecondary program or completed a degree or vocational certificate within 5 years, compared with 43 percent of those with three or more risk factors. Thus, among 1999–2000 undergraduate students with three or more risk factors, at least half might be expected to leave postsecondary education without completing a degree or certificate.⁸

⁸The time frame of the persistence survey was 5 years, so it is possible that some students could return after 5 years.

Table C.—Percentage of 1999–2000 undergraduates with various risk factors, and the average number of risk factors

| Student characteristics | Any risk factors | Delayed enrollment | Part-time attendance | Financially independent | Have dependents or children | Single parent | No high school diploma | Work full time while enrolled | Average number of risk factors |
|--|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Total | 75.0 | 45.5 | 49.1 | 50.9 | 26.9 | 13.3 | 7.8 | 37.8 | 2.2 |
| Gender | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 74.8 | 46.4 | 48.3 | 47.5 | 21.5 | 9.1 | 7.5 | 40.7 | 2.1 |
| Female | 75.2 | 44.8 | 49.8 | 53.5 | 31.0 | 16.5 | 8.1 | 35.7 | 2.3 |
| Race/ethnicity | | | | | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 72.7 | 42.8 | 48.7 | 48.3 | 23.7 | 10.0 | 6.1 | 37.2 | 2.0 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 81.5 | 53.1 | 49.3 | 62.4 | 42.8 | 28.9 | 9.7 | 42.8 | 2.7 |
| Hispanic* | 81.4 | 50.9 | 52.2 | 54.3 | 32.4 | 17.3 | 12.3 | 41.4 | 2.4 |
| Asian | 73.5 | 49.7 | 45.6 | 47.7 | 18.5 | 9.7 | 14.1 | 24.9 | 1.9 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 83.9 | 57.9 | 56.6 | 65.9 | 37.5 | 21.1 | 13.2 | 46.7 | 2.8 |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | 79.1 | 53.4 | 53.4 | 48.2 | 20.1 | 9.6 | 11.4 | 30.7 | 2.1 |
| Other | 71.5 | 35.2 | 45.6 | 43.5 | 18.4 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 34.4 | 1.9 |
| Age | | | | | | | | | |
| 18 or younger | 40.8 | 9.6 | 26.3 | 6.9 | 5.6 | 5.2 | 5.3 | 16.1 | 0.7 |
| 19–23 years | 59.4 | 31.2 | 34.0 | 15.6 | 11.1 | 8.8 | 4.4 | 24.2 | 1.2 |
| 24–29 years | 100.0 | 62.5 | 61.6 | 100.0 | 35.4 | 19.4 | 10.1 | 52.1 | 3.2 |
| 30–39 years | 100.0 | 72.9 | 73.1 | 100.0 | 61.0 | 23.0 | 14.4 | 60.8 | 3.8 |
| 40 years or older | 100.0 | 74.7 | 82.0 | 100.0 | 55.0 | 17.4 | 12.9 | 62.7 | 3.8 |
| Respondent has dependents | | | | | | | | | |
| None | 65.9 | 37.5 | 42.8 | 32.8 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.8 | 30.5 | 1.4 |
| One or more | 100.0 | 67.6 | 66.3 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 49.4 | 13.4 | 57.0 | 4.3 |
| Single parent | | | | | | | | | |
| No | 71.2 | 42.1 | 47.6 | 43.4 | 15.7 | 0.0 | 6.6 | 35.7 | 1.8 |
| Yes | 100.0 | 68.0 | 59.2 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 15.9 | 54.2 | 4.7 |
| Disability or difficulty status | | | | | | | | | |
| No disability reported | 71.5 | 35.6 | 47.1 | 47.8 | 26.7 | 11.3 | 6.4 | 39.7 | 2.1 |
| Some disability reported | 82.9 | 47.1 | 51.7 | 63.3 | 34.8 | 16.6 | 12.1 | 33.8 | 2.6 |

*Priority was given to Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race chosen.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Conclusions

This profile of 1999–2000 undergraduates suggests that the postsecondary education system in the United States offers opportunities to a diverse group of individuals. Indeed, the admissions policies of most community colleges and some 4-year colleges—combined with federal, state, and institutional financial aid—have provided access to postsecondary education for individuals of widely varying backgrounds and resources. Despite such

enrollment opportunities, however, gaining access to postsecondary education does not necessarily lead to obtaining a degree or certificate. In fact, as the diversity of the undergraduate population broadens, it is possible that the rate of leaving postsecondary education without a degree will increase. Accommodating an undergraduate population that carries a substantial risk of attrition will be a continuing challenge to postsecondary education institutions.