

SREB

Measuring Success by Degrees:

*The Status of College
Completion in SREB States*

2010

Southern
Regional
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Board

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CHALLENGE TO LEAD SERIES



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It is part of the *Challenge to Lead* education goals series, directed by Jeff Gagne. For more information, e-mail jeff.gagne@sreb.org or call (404) 875-9211. *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* is available on the SREB website at www.sreb.org. A full listing of the goals, including reports on each goal, is printed on the inside back cover.

A Message from the President of SREB

By now, you are well aware that America risks losing its standing internationally in postsecondary education. And the serious state of the economy makes improving college completion difficult — but no less urgent.

This newest SREB report, *Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States*, points to the challenges that SREB states — and the entire nation — face as they seek to raise the education levels of their residents. It complements the recent SREB report on college completion, *No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion*, which details how states can meet these challenges head-on.

Most states have found success in improving degree completion in a few areas, but the challenge is **addressing many different fronts all at once** — from **keeping college costs down and strengthening financial aid, to bringing more adults back to college, to insisting on more productivity and efficiency** in our colleges and universities. We know *how* states can work toward meeting the SREB target of having 60 percent of adults ages 25 to 64 earn some type of degree or high-quality career certificate, so let's get to work.

Measuring Success by Degrees both provides details on where our region stands and challenges states to take action in these areas:

- **Student demographics in SREB states and the nation continue to change dramatically.** The percentages of Hispanic and low-income students in public schools are projected to increase annually for the foreseeable future. Unless our states do more to help these students move through the education pipeline, the economic future of the region could be in jeopardy.
- **More high school graduates now enroll in college** in SREB states, but this promising trend is tempered by the continuing struggle to get more ninth-graders through high school.
- **Nearly one in five college freshmen in four-year institutions in SREB states does not persist to the sophomore year.** In the separate report *Promoting a Culture of Student Success* (online at www.sreb.org), SREB provides examples of institutions that are helping more students persist and succeed in college. More colleges should follow their lead.
- **College graduation rates are too low** — at about 55 percent nationwide and 53 percent in SREB states. While these rates do not tell the whole story (leaving out part-time students, transfer students and students who take a long time to graduate), they do show that too few students complete college.
- **Just as important as raising graduation rates is increasing the actual *numbers* of degrees and certificates awarded each year.** Maintaining the **quality** of those degrees and certificates is also important.

Meeting college-completion targets doesn't just mean sending a multitude of new students to flagship universities. It does involve helping many more students earn a bachelor's degree, of course. But it also means ensuring that more students earn two-year degrees and high-quality career certificates.

All of these credentials require hard work and academic commitment from students and colleges. These credentials can lead to excellent jobs in technology, the automotive industry, green energy, nursing, law enforcement and many other high-demand fields.

Even with the many advances in education, SREB states remain steps behind the nation in the percentage of adults with college degrees. But they can finally change this reality with more work and focus — and it will pay off.

I challenge you as a state leader to build consensus in your state on these issues and to take action now. Let me know how SREB can help you in this critical work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David S. Spence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dave Spence

Measuring Success by Degrees:

The Status of College Completion in SREB States

The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.

One of the SREB *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education

The United States' standing as an international leader in postsecondary education is in jeopardy. **The current generation of young adults in America likely will be less well-educated than their parents**, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

Young adults in many other developed nations have outpaced their parents' levels of education, while young adults in the United States are not keeping pace with their parents in the percentage who have earned associate's degrees or higher.

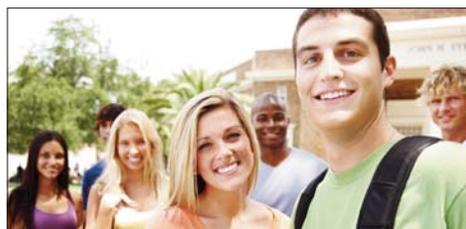
SREB states have long recognized the critical need to improve college completion. Adopted in 2002, the *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education call for all SREB states to increase the percentage of adults earning college degrees or certificates to rates above national averages.

And despite some improvements, the graduation rate for students at four-year colleges and universities in SREB states continues to trail that of their peers nationwide. The region's economic prospects may very well depend on more aggressive efforts to raise degree- and certificate-completion rates.

In 2008, not quite 35 percent of working-age adults in SREB states had earned associate's degrees or higher. SREB's 2010 report *No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion* issues an ambitious challenge: for every SREB state to have 60 percent of its

adults ages 25 to 64 hold an associate's or bachelor's degree or career certificate by 2025.

The national agenda is no less daunting. President Barack Obama addressed the serious economic need for higher levels of college participation and completion in his 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, challenging every American to "commit to at least one year or more of higher education" to meet the demands of a changing economy. He noted that three-quarters of the nation's fastest-growing jobs demand at least some postsecondary education. The president is calling for the nation to increase "college-completion rates from 40 percent to 60 percent by 2020" and return the United States to its previous status as the world's education leader.



The current generation of young adults in America likely will be less well-educated than their parents.

Five leading foundations — the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Lumina Foundation for Education and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation — joined forces in 2009 to improve college completion. The resulting national non-profit group, Complete College America, is working with a network of states to strengthen state policies affecting college access and success.

By fall 2010, 24 states had joined the initiative, including nine SREB states: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia. SREB is collaborating with Complete College America to help states substantially increase degree completion.

SREB's goal of improving college completion cannot be addressed in isolation from other education goals — including increasing high school graduation, improving students' college readiness, expanding students' access to college and helping students persist in their studies from one year to the next.

Changes in the economic and demographic landscape across the SREB region also demand that the goal of improving college completion receive renewed attention and heightened priority.

SREB states continue to become more diverse, with expanding racial and ethnic minority populations and more low-income families — groups with historically lower levels of education attainment. As the proportions of these groups continue to grow, states need to ensure that many more

students from these groups complete higher education than they have in the past. Otherwise, states cannot maintain their current percentages of adults with bachelor's degrees.

A college degree has never been more important for a student's economic future. According to the 2009 *SREB Fact Book on Higher Education*, the difference in annual income between an American worker with a bachelor's degree and one with a high school diploma was more than \$25,000 in 2008. This makes the bachelor's degree the "gateway to the American middle class," according to the White House Task Force on the Middle Class. The lifelong payoff for students who earn a degree early in their lives is significant. Students who earn degrees when they are young have more time to reap higher earnings from their level of education.

Many of the obstacles to college completion are well-known. But state leaders and policy-makers can take steps to help students overcome them.

SREB's *No Time to Waste* report details three essential areas where state leaders can take action to increase college completion: improved access to college, institutional actions that promote completion, and greater institutional productivity and cost-efficiency. (See the report at www.sreb.org for complete information.) The report also makes recommendations on other key issues, including:

Academic readiness: Students who are not academically prepared for college have a poor chance of finishing a degree. Achieve Inc. estimated in 2009 that four of 10 college students needed at least one remedial course. And too few of these students graduate: The Center for American Progress found that less than one-third of students who take a remedial course earn a degree or certificate. Students who are prepared academically complete college at a rate more than double that of unprepared students.

Costs: Increases in college costs for students continue to outpace inflation, and many young adults and their families are finding they cannot afford college on their own. Grants, scholarships



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In 2010, SREB convened an advisory panel of state leaders to study college completion.

and tax credits often are no longer sufficient to cover the costs of attendance, including required tuition, fees, and room and board at most colleges.

Transfer policies: Poor statewide college-transfer policies in many states leave students with no guarantee that their hard-earned and expensive credits will be accepted at other institutions — even if they keep the same major. Several SREB states have implemented comprehensive transfer policies that offer protection to students moving from one institution to another. These policies are a good start, but many states need to do more.

Key questions about college completion

In 2010, SREB convened an advisory panel of state leaders to study college completion, answer key questions and make policy recommendations to guide states toward improvement. The com-

mitment of these leaders and philanthropic groups to address the problems of college completion — both nationwide and in SREB states — underscores the consensus and urgency surrounding the issue.

Policy-makers must first know where their states currently stand. This report begins with a short **profile of the demographic changes** challenging SREB states. Next, it documents the number of recent high school graduates who enroll in college, and then traces whether these students persist into their sophomore year and complete a college degree or certificate. The report answers **four key questions** about how effectively students in SREB states are moving into college and leaving with degrees and certificates:

- Are increasing percentages of all groups of recent high school graduates in SREB states enrolling in two- and four-year colleges and universities? Are these rates exceeding national averages?
- Are greater percentages of freshmen in SREB states enrolling for a second year of college?
- Are the percentages of all groups of students in SREB states earning degrees or certificates from two- and four-year colleges and universities increasing to exceed national averages?
- Are the proportions of adults with a college degree in SREB states increasing? Are SREB states' proportions exceeding national levels for all groups of students?

Profile: Demographic Changes Challenge SREB States

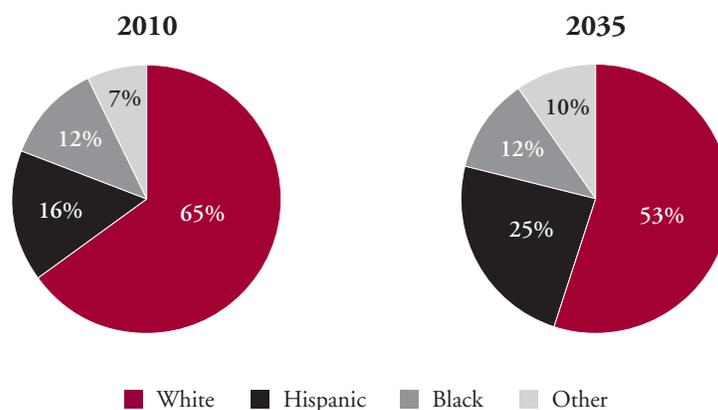
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population nationwide is expected to increase by more than 25 percent in the next 25 years. However, this increase will not occur evenly among all racial and ethnic groups; in fact, not all groups will grow.

The greatest increase is projected among Hispanic populations, with nearly 50 million more

Hispanic children and adults projected in the nation by 2035 — almost doubling the number of Hispanic people in the overall population. This large increase will be accompanied by more modest growth of nearly 10 million black children and adults. The number of children and adults in the white population is projected to increase only slightly, by just over six million. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Projected Proportions of the U.S. Population, by Racial/Ethnic Group
State populations needing postsecondary education will become more diverse in the future.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008.

Why are these demographic trends important to college completion? Because the racial and ethnic groups in SREB states — and across much of the nation — projected to see the most growth over the next few decades currently have lower levels of education attainment.

The increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the region makes states' ability to reach college access and completion targets even more challenging and necessary. This means states should expand the pipeline to college to ensure that higher numbers of all high school students are prepared for college-level work. Otherwise, states likely will see lower percentages of high school students graduate from college than they did in the past — a major threat to the nation's global economic standing.

Work-force demands are clear: By 2012, the United States will have three million additional jobs requiring a bachelor's degree but not enough college graduates to fill them, according to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University. In fact, 60 percent of all new jobs created by 2012 will require some form of postsecondary education. Without more people

earning college degrees and certificates, **states likely will face a shortage of educated workers** to fill these jobs.

Too many students already miss out on jobs that require higher levels of education because they drop out of the education pipeline in either high school or college.

SREB states continue to trail the nation in the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate from high school on time. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), 70 percent of ninth-graders in fall 2003 in the SREB median states graduated from high school by 2007, compared with 74 percent in the nation.

While SREB states have narrowed the gap with the nation on high school graduation rates, by 2007 five SREB states still had graduated less than two-thirds of students who were ninth-graders in 2003: Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Eleven SREB states had graduated less than three-fourths of these students.

The situation is even more troubling for black and Hispanic students. In every SREB state for

which an AFGR could be calculated, graduation rates were lower for black students than for white students in 2007. Hispanic students' rates were lower than white students' in 14 of the 15 SREB states for which an AFGR was reported that year.

The U.S. Department of Education requires all states to report high school graduation rates. States are permitted to use various calculations to determine graduation rates until 2011, when a federally mandated rate will be instituted. Regardless of how graduation rates are calculated and even with major improvements in some states, one fact is clear: **Too few students complete high school on time.** (For a full explanation of high school graduation rates, see the 2009 SREB report *Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts* at www.sreb.org.)

Weak high school graduation rates for black and Hispanic students mean that too many of these students never get far enough in school to have the opportunity to attend college. These groups of students have disproportionately lower

rates of college enrollment and degree completion than their white peers. (See Figure 2.)

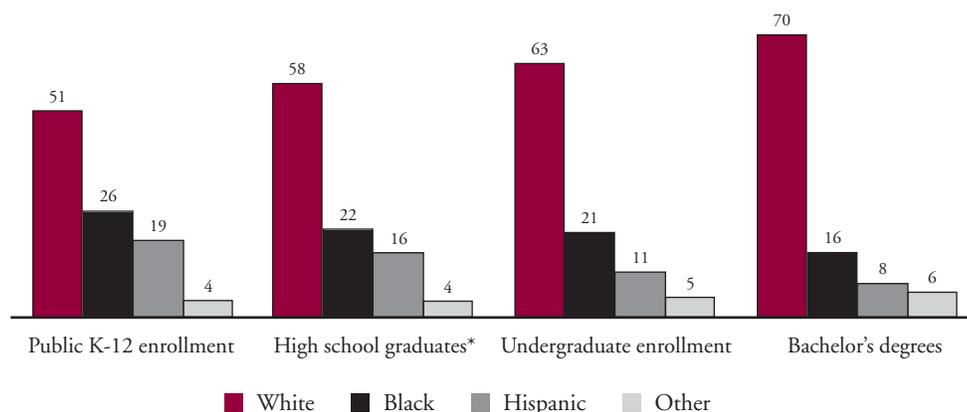
Black students represented 26 percent of public K-12 school enrollment in SREB states in 2006, but only 22 percent of the region's high school graduates, 21 percent of college undergraduates, and 16 percent of students earning bachelor's degrees that year.

Hispanic students accounted for 19 percent of public K-12 school enrollment in the SREB region, 16 percent of high school graduates, 11 percent of undergraduate enrollment and 8 percent of students earning bachelor's degrees.

Quite simply, SREB states — and the nation as a whole — are losing their fastest-growing groups of students. Continuing to lose them in such substantial numbers will significantly undermine states' overall education attainment levels in the years to come. States cannot meet the regional and national goals for raising the education levels of their residents unless they help more of these students finish high school well-prepared to succeed in postsecondary education.

Figure 2

Proportions of Students in SREB States at Key Education Stages, by Racial/Ethnic Group, 2006
The proportions of black and Hispanic students decline as they advance in education.



* Excludes South Carolina, which did not report high school graduates by racial and ethnic group to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics and *SREB Fact Book on Higher Education*.

Key Questions for State Policy-Makers

QUESTION 1:

**Are increasing percentages of all groups of recent high school graduates in SREB states enrolling in two- and four-year colleges and universities?
Are these rates exceeding national averages?**

Yes, in most SREB states. Fourteen SREB states enrolled a greater percentage of all recent high school graduates in two- and four-year colleges and universities in 2008 than in 2000. In SREB states, 62 percent of recent high school graduates enrolled in a college or university in 2008 — trailing the nation by 1 percentage point. In fact, the regional and national percentages were similar over the eight-year period. (See Table 1.)

Nine SREB states had increases in college enrollment that exceeded the nation's increase over the same period — including five states with gains of 10 percentage points or more. Ten SREB states exceeded the national percentage of recent high school graduates who enrolled in college in fall 2008.

The rate of recent high school graduates enrolling in colleges in SREB states in 2008 ranged from a high of 78 percent in Mississippi to a low of 54 percent in Florida. Four states — Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina — were among the top 10 nationally in college enrollment of recent high school graduates that year.



Fewer than half of ninth-graders in SREB states are likely to enroll in college by their 19th birthdays.

Even with these successes, too few students enrolled in college just after high school graduation in SREB states and in the nation. For the country to regain its standing as a global leader in education, college enrollment rates need to grow.

How can states improve ninth-graders' chances of going to college?

The success of SREB states in enrolling larger percentages of recent high school graduates in college is tempered by the fact that **fewer than half** of ninth-graders in SREB states are likely to enroll in college by their 19th birthdays.

Considering *both* the high school graduation rate and the college enrollment rate of recent high school graduates, a ninth-grader's estimated "chance for college" in many SREB states is far too low.

Both nationally and regionally, a ninth-grader in fall 2002 on track for graduation in spring 2006 had only a 44 percent chance of going to college immediately after high school. In nine SREB states, a student's "chance for college" exceeded the national rate: Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Virginia. (See Figure 3 on Page 8.)

States with poor high school graduation rates have smaller pools of students to enroll in college. **States cannot improve college completion if their high school graduation rates remain low** — closing the possibility of college for many high school students.

Table 1

Percent of Recent High School Graduates Who Enrolled in College¹
Rates of college enrollment in most SREB states are higher than in the nation.

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	Percentage-Point Change 2000 to 2008	National Rank 2008
United States	56	57	56	61	63	7	
SREB states	57	56	57	61	62	5	
SREB states as a percent of U.S.	101	99	101	100	98	-3	
Alabama	58	57	59	62	66	8	15
Arkansas	53	57	56	59	62	9	30
Delaware	57	54	52	64	67	10	14
Florida	57	55	52	56	54	-3	43
Georgia	61	59	64	67	72	11	6
Kentucky	59	58	57	63	60	1	32
Louisiana	59	57	55	65	70	11	9
Maryland	55	56	58	65	64	9	19
Mississippi	64	65	60	76	78	14	2
North Carolina	65	63	64	64	65	0	17
Oklahoma	50	51	53	60	58	8	38
South Carolina	66	60	67	70	71	5	7
Tennessee	63	64	64	68	69	6	11
Texas	53	52	52	53	55	2	41
Virginia	53	54	58	64	66	13	16
West Virginia	53	54	53	57	59	6	36

Note: State percentages that are equal to or greater than the national percentages are shown in **bold**.

¹ The rate for each state is based on the number of state residents who graduated from high school within the previous 12 months and enrolled as first-time freshmen at in-state or out-of-state two- and four-year colleges and universities for the fall term.

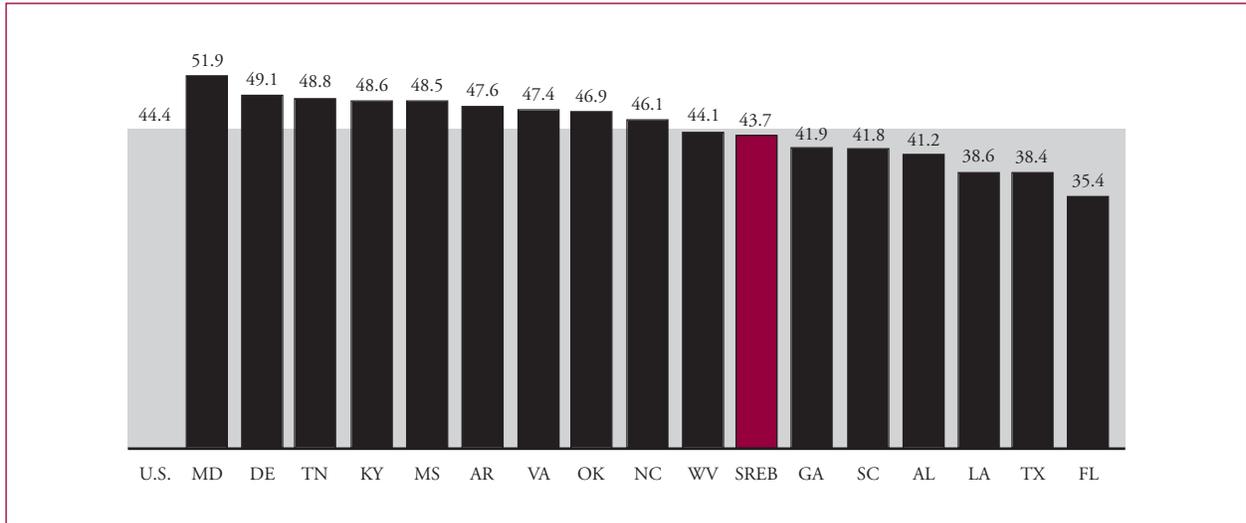
Source: SREB analysis of National Center for Education Statistics fall enrollment surveys.

For instance, although South Carolina ranked in the *top 10* nationally in college enrollment of recent high school graduates, with 70 percent or more going to college in 2006 and 2008, its high school graduation rate ranked *near the bottom*

nationally. Together, the two rates meant that a ninth-grader's "chance for college" also ranked near the bottom nationally in both years. In this case, a ninth-grader's biggest hurdle in going to college was simply graduating from high school.

Figure 3

2002 Ninth-Graders' Chance for College* Enrollment by Age 19



* “Chance for college” is calculated by multiplying the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for the Class of 2006 by the percent of recent high school graduates who enrolled in college in fall 2006. Based on a calculation developed by policy analyst Tom Mortenson of *Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY*.

Sources: SREB analysis of data from the 2007 *Common Core of Data* and National Center for Education Statistics 2006 fall enrollment survey.

Georgia and Louisiana were among the other SREB states with a low “chance for college” ranking mostly because of poor high school graduation rates. In both states, about two-thirds of recent high school graduates enrolled immediately in college in 2006. But only about three of five freshmen in 2002 graduated from high school by 2006.

State leaders can help increase the likelihood of a typical ninth-grader reaching college by ensuring that the state provides a rigorous, college- and career-ready high school curriculum and the necessary academic and social supports to help more students meet state high school graduation requirements.



QUESTION 2:

Are greater percentages of freshmen in SREB states enrolling for a second year of college?

Half of SREB states increased the percentage of freshmen who enrolled for a second year at two- or four-year public colleges and universities from 2002 to 2007. These increases were generally modest, however. (See Table 2.)

First-year persistence rates are important indicators of colleges’ and universities’ effectiveness in keeping students engaged beyond the freshman year. If first-year students do not continue immediately into their second year, they are much less likely to ever complete a degree.

Table 2

Percent of First-Time, Full-Time College Students Who Enrolled for a Second Year
Too few freshmen persist to a second year of college in SREB states.

	First-Year Persistence Rate ¹			
	Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities		Public Two-Year Colleges	
	2002 Cohort ²	2007 Cohort	2002 Cohort	2007 Cohort
United States	—	—	—	—
SREB states	85	85	60	65
Alabama	85	86	76	74
Arkansas	78	76	56	54
Delaware	80	89	—	60
Florida	86	87	72	73
Georgia	86	86	71	65
Kentucky	83	83	64	66
Louisiana	79	80	61	60
Maryland	88	87	77	68
Mississippi	75	75	—	63
North Carolina	84	84	—	58
Oklahoma	82	85	60	62
South Carolina	86	86	62	61
Tennessee	81	82	63	60
Texas	90	88	65	64
Virginia	89	90	63	67
West Virginia	78	78	60	57

Note: “—” indicates data not available.

¹ The SREB first-year **persistence rate** is the percentage of students who remained enrolled at the institution they first attended as well as students who transferred to other colleges the next fall. These calculations are possible through information made available to the SREB-State Data Exchange by state higher education agencies. No comparable national rate exists.

² Cohort year indicates the year the student entered the institution.

Source: SREB State-Data Exchange.

How many students leave college after their freshman year? In 2007, the loss of full-time students from their first to second year at public **four-year** colleges and universities in SREB states ranged from a low of 10 percent in Virginia to a high of 25 percent in Mississippi. This means up to one in four freshmen did not return to college the next fall.

From 2002 to 2007, seven SREB states increased the percentage of freshmen at four-year colleges and universities who returned to college for a second year: Alabama, Delaware, Florida,

Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Virginia. Delaware had the greatest increase of all SREB states — 9 percentage points.

Persistence at public **two-year** colleges was lower than at four-year colleges. In various SREB states, from one-quarter to nearly half of all full-time students who started at two-year colleges in 2007 did not return for a second year the following fall.

There is good news for two-year colleges, however. Four SREB states — Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma and Virginia — increased the persis-

tence rate of freshmen at two-year colleges in 2007 compared with those who entered in 2002. Yet, nine SREB states had lower persistence rates for students who began at two-year colleges in 2007 compared with those who began in 2002.

Disappointingly, some states with relatively high rates of recent high school graduates enrolling in college also had relatively low persis-

tence rates. In Mississippi, for example, three of four high school graduates enrolled in college immediately — exceeding the national and regional rates. But Mississippi had the region’s lowest percentage of college freshmen who persisted to their second year at four-year colleges and universities — 75 percent — trailing the regional rate by 10 percentage points.



QUESTION 3:

Are the percentages of all groups of students in SREB states earning degrees or certificates from two- and four-year colleges and universities increasing to exceed national averages?

Yes, most SREB states increased the percentage of students who earned bachelor’s degrees at public four-year colleges in recent years — but most states’ graduation rates for two- and four-year colleges lagged behind the nation’s.

The SREB region’s graduation rate for first-time, full-time students who entered public **four-year** colleges and universities in 2002 was 4 percentage points higher than it was for those who entered in 1997. Fourteen SREB states increased the graduation rate for students who entered these schools during the same five-year period. Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland and Tennessee raised their rates by more than 4 percentage points over the period. (See Table 3 on Page 12.)

Graduation rates at public **two-year** colleges are less encouraging. Five SREB states raised the graduation rate for students who entered a two-year college in 2005 compared with those who entered in 2000. Only one SREB state — Maryland — raised its rate by more than 3 percentage points. Too few students who start two-year colleges in SREB states end up graduating.

In nine SREB states, fewer than half of the full-time students who started college in 2002 at public **four-year** colleges and universities completed a bachelor’s degree at the same institution by 2008.

Most SREB states increased the percentage of students who earned bachelor’s degrees at public four-year colleges in recent years.



In every SREB state except Florida, fewer than 25 percent of full-time students who began at **two-year** colleges in 2005 completed a degree or certificate at the same institution within three years.

Six SREB states — Delaware, Florida, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia — exceeded the national college graduation rate for students who began college in 2002 and completed a degree at a public **four-year** college or university by 2008. Four SREB states — Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina — exceeded the national graduation rate for students who entered public **two-year** colleges in 2005. (See Box A for how college graduation rates are calculated and for information on the national college graduation rate.)

How College Graduation Rates are Calculated

College and university graduation rates, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), state agencies and in this report, are **the percentages of first-time, full-time students who begin and complete their college degrees at the same institutions**. Transfer and part-time students are not included in the calculation. Rates included in this report for the nation and individual states are calculated in this manner.

Graduation rates count those who graduate within 150 percent of normal time for that particular degree. This means students working toward four-year degrees are counted as graduates if they complete a bachelor's degree in six years or less, and those working toward two-year degrees are counted as graduates if they complete an associate's degree or certificate in three years or less.

The 150 percent for students in certain majors may be longer than six years because a longer time may be needed to meet the requirements of those programs (for example, in architecture).

In 2007, NCES began reporting a national college graduation rate for public two- and four-year colleges and universities. Policy-makers can compare their state's rates with this national rate.

Even though several SREB states have increased the graduation rates of students attending four-year colleges and universities, too few states exceeded the national rate in 2008. Two-year colleges face an even steeper climb to reach the national rate.

Progression rates expand view of degree completion in SREB states

College graduation rates are important, but the complex and changing paths of many students make it necessary for colleges to have intermediary measures to help them track students' progress along the way. Many of today's full-time and part-time students transfer from institution to institution, change majors, or take long breaks. Since none of these students is counted in college graduation rates, some colleges and universities have found other measures of student progress to be more helpful.

The college *progression rate*, developed by the SREB-State Data Exchange for SREB states, accounts for students who complete a degree within 150 percent of normal time, those who remain enrolled after 150 percent of normal time, and those who transfer to another institution within 150 percent of normal time.

In nine SREB states, at least 70 percent of first-time, full-time students in the 2002 freshman cohort at public **four-year** colleges and universities completed a degree from the institution where they began *or* remained enrolled in that or another institution by 2008. (See Table 3 on Page 12.)

Thirteen SREB states had progression rates that exceeded their graduation rates by double-digit percentage points. Arkansas, Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas had progression rates that were more than 25 percentage points higher than their graduation rates. These higher progression rates mean that more students are likely to graduate from the college where they began — or another one — than the national rate shows. Students may gra-



Many of today's full-time and part-time students transfer from institution to institution, change majors, or take long breaks.

duate from the same institution where they began — but take longer than six years to finish — or transfer to another institution.

The effects of transfers and the increased time it takes many students to finish a degree are even

greater on graduation rates at public two-year colleges.

Every SREB state had progression rates at two-year colleges that exceeded their 2008 graduation rates by more than double-digit percentage points.

Table 3

Percent of First-Time, Full-Time College Students Who Graduated or Remained Enrolled
College graduation rates in most SREB states trail the national rate.

	Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities			Public Two-Year Colleges		
	Progression Rate ¹	Graduation Rate ²		Progression Rate	Graduation Rate	
	2002 Cohort ³	1997 Cohort	2002 Cohort	2005 Cohort	2000 Cohort	2005 Cohort
United States	—	—	55	—	—	20
SREB states	75	49	53	48	17	17
SREB states as a percent of U.S.	—	—	96	—	—	85
Alabama	65	47	48	47	18	19
Arkansas	66	36	37	47	18	21
Delaware	67	67	67	19 ⁴	14	6
Florida	78	58	59	61	32	31
Georgia	76	44	50	43	15	12
Kentucky	66	46	48	43	19	19
Louisiana	63	33	38	49	8	6
Maryland	71	58	65	56	8	14
Mississippi	55	51	49	43	—	23
North Carolina	77	58	59	32 ⁴	18	20
Oklahoma	85	44	47	47	20	17
South Carolina	78	57	60	42	15	11
Tennessee	71	43	48	43	12	11
Texas	84	45	49	52	12	11
Virginia	85	64	67	47	15	15
West Virginia	67	45	48	44	15	16

Notes: State percentages that are equal to or greater than the national percentages are shown in **bold**.
 “—” indicates data not available.

¹ The SREB **progression rate** is the percentage of entering students who, within 150 percent of normal program time (six years at four-year institutions and three years at two-year institutions), either completed a degree or certificate at or remained enrolled at their original institutions, or transferred to other postsecondary institutions.

² The **graduation rate** is the percentage of students who, within 150 percent of normal program time (six years for four-year institutions and three years for two-year institutions), completed a degree or certificate at their original institutions.

³ Cohort year indicates the year the student entered the institution.

⁴ Two-year colleges in Delaware and North Carolina did not report student transfers or those still enrolled after three years. Therefore, the progression rates calculated for these states are incomplete.

Sources: SREB State-Data Exchange and SREB analysis of National Center for Education Statistics graduation rate surveys.

In three SREB states — Florida, Maryland and Texas — more than half of the students who entered a public two-year college in 2005 were still enrolled, had transferred or had received a degree or certificate at their original institutions by 2008.

Florida had the region's highest graduation rate for two-year colleges, yet its progression rate was roughly double its graduation rate. In Maryland and Texas, the graduation rates were one-fourth and one-fifth their progression rates, respectively, suggesting that many students in these states are transferring to other institutions or are taking longer to finish associate's degrees — both paths not accounted for in the graduation rate.

Colleges and universities need to help more of these students complete degrees and certificates — and to help students graduate more quickly. SREB's *No Time to Waste* report recommends many ways states can address this issue.

Black, Hispanic students in many SREB states have made improvements in college completion

As the populations of SREB states become more diverse, efforts to ensure that black and Hispanic students successfully complete college become more important than ever.

Black students in SREB states earned bachelor's degrees from public **four-year** institutions at the same rate in 2008 as black students nationwide. The graduation rate for Hispanic students in the region trailed the national rate for their peers by 2 percentage points that year. White students in the region trailed their peers nationwide by 1 percentage point. (See Table 4 on Page 14.)

Hispanic students' graduation rates in seven SREB states exceeded the rate for their national peers in 2008. The rates in five SREB states — Delaware, Florida, Maryland, South Carolina and Virginia — exceeded the national rate for Hispanic students by more than 10 percentage points. While some SREB states are making strides in increasing the graduation rates of Hispanic students, **the rate gap between Hispanic and white students remains wide in many states.**



Efforts to ensure that black and Hispanic students successfully complete college have become more important than ever.

Graduation rates for black students in eight SREB states exceeded the national rate for black students at four-year institutions in 2008. Florida, South Carolina and Virginia exceeded the national rate for black students by at least 10 percentage points. However, black students continue to graduate from four-year colleges at lower rates than both Hispanic and white students in most SREB states.

In four SREB states, fewer than a third of the black freshmen who enrolled full-time in a public four-year institution in 2002 graduated from the same institution by 2008. In 14 SREB states, the graduation rate was less than half.

Graduation rates at public **two-year** colleges in SREB states were more disappointing. Fewer than one in five black, Hispanic or white students who enrolled full-time in public two-year colleges in 2005 completed an associate's degree by 2008.

First-time, full-time Hispanic students starting at public two-year colleges in 2005 completed an associate's degree at a higher rate than their national peers in four SREB states: Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina. The rates in Arkansas and Florida exceeded the national rate by at least 15 percentage points. Graduation rates for first-time, full-time black students enrolling in these colleges also exceeded the national rate for their peers in four SREB states: Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina. The graduation rate for black students in Arkansas equaled the national rate for their peers.

Table 4

Percent of First-Time, Full-Time College Students Who Graduated, by Racial/Ethnic Group
Too few black and Hispanic college students in SREB states complete degrees.

	Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities			Public Two-Year Colleges		
	2002 Cohort ¹			2005 Cohort		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
United States	57	39	46	23	11	15
SREB states	56	39	44	19	13	14
SREB states as a percent of U.S. ²	98	99	95	83	112	94
Alabama	55	31	42	18	18	12
Arkansas	43	24	33	25	11	31
Delaware	80	41	68	9	2	8
Florida	63	51	57	37	20	30
Georgia	52	40	53	12	5	10
Kentucky	47	33	38	23	10	13
Louisiana	44	28	37	7	7	8
Maryland	71	40	68	16	5	9
Mississippi	56	40	38	25	22	16
North Carolina	63	47	54	22	16	22
Oklahoma	49	35	45	18	10	12
South Carolina	63	53	61	13	9	12
Tennessee	48	38	37	13	3	9
Texas	54	30	36	12	8	11
Virginia	71	49	65	17	8	13
West Virginia	47	34	41	16	10	11

Note: State percentages that are equal to or greater than the national percentages are shown in **bold**.

¹ Each cohort shows the percentage of students in the fall 2002 or fall 2005 who, within 150 percent of normal program time (six years at four-year institutions and three years at two-year institutions), completed a bachelor's or associate's degree at their original institutions.

² "SREB states as a percent of U.S." may not calculate correctly due to rounding of the figures shown.

Source: SREB analysis of National Center for Education Statistics graduation rate surveys.

But graduation rates for full-time black students at two-year colleges in several SREB states are low. Four SREB states graduated no more than one in 20 black students who entered a two-year college in 2005. Eight SREB states graduated fewer than one in 10 of these full-time students.

These results are especially alarming because higher proportions of black and Hispanic students than white students attend two-year colleges than four-year colleges and universities in the region

and the nation. **Policy-makers and education leaders should work to ensure that programs and policies in their state's colleges improve college completion for *all* students.** For examples of successful institution-based policies to help students graduate at higher rates, see the SREB report *Promoting a Culture of Student Success: How Colleges and Universities Are Improving Degree Completion* at www.sreb.org.

QUESTION 4:

Are the proportions of adults with a college degree in SREB states increasing? Are SREB states' proportions exceeding national levels for all groups of students?

The proportions of adults with associate's degrees or higher are increasing in many SREB states, but much too slowly for states to reach the target of having 60 percent of adults earn college degrees or certificates by 2025. The percentage of all adults ages 25 and older with a *bachelor's degree* in SREB states increased by 3 points from 2002 to 2008. SREB states continue to trail the nation on this measure, but the gap between the region and the nation was cut in half from 2002 to 2008.

Also, the proportions of black and Hispanic graduates in SREB states have increased over time. Hispanic students earned 13 percent of the associate's degrees and 9 percent of the bachelor's degrees in 2008, up from 8 percent and 6 percent respectively in 1998. Black students earned 19 percent of the associate's degrees and 16 percent of the bachelor's degrees in 2008, up from 15 percent and 14 percent respectively in 1998.

Why are these proportions important? Unlike college graduation rates — which account for the college-going population at a given time — this measure, called the *attainment rate*, shows the overall proportion of adults in a state who have attained a college degree, regardless of when the degree was completed.

Some populations of adults in SREB states are doing better than the nation in education attainment. A larger percentage of Hispanic adults in the region than in the nation had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2008. Black adults in the region matched the national percentage. The rate for white adults trailed the nation's, however.

In today's economy, many employers now demand workers with some type of college degree. High-paying jobs requiring only a high school credential are rare. Broad, sustained economic

recovery clearly depends in part on **increasing the education attainment rates of more workers.**

If SREB states are to track these attainment rates in the future, they need better measures to show the percentages of adults who hold career certificates from postsecondary institutions. Until these measures are available, states will need to collect annual data on the certificates produced so they can know whether more people are earning certificates and whether they are meeting the target.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 12 SREB states increased the percentage of adults with at least a bachelor's degree from 2002 to 2008. The increases in some states, however, were too small to be considered significant. (See Table 5 on Page 16.)

Ten SREB states had significant increases in their attainment rates: Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. These increases were modest, with no SREB state increasing bachelor's degree attainment by more than 3 percentage points during the period.



SREB states need better measures to show the percentages of adults who hold career certificates from postsecondary institutions.

Table 5

Percent of Adults Ages 25 and Older with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher
Most SREB states' attainment levels for all adults continue to trail the nation's.

	2002	2004	2006	2008	Is the change significant? ¹	2008		
						White	Black	Hispanic
United States	26	27	27	27	Yes	29	17	13
SREB median	22	23	22	25	No	27	17	14
SREB states as a percent of U.S. ²	85	85	81	92	NA	94	96	114
Alabama	21	22	21	22	No	24	14	13
Arkansas	20	18	18	19	No	20	12	9
Delaware	25	28	27	27	Yes	28	18	12
Florida	24	25	25	26	Yes	27	16	21
Georgia	24	26	27	27	Yes	30	19	13
Kentucky	19	19	20	20	No	20	13	15
Louisiana	20	22	20	20	No	24	12	19
Maryland	33	35	35	35	Yes	39	24	21
Mississippi	18	19	19	19	Yes	23	12	12
North Carolina	23	25	25	26	Yes	29	16	12
Oklahoma	21	22	22	22	Yes	24	16	9
South Carolina	23	25	23	23	No	27	12	12
Tennessee	21	22	22	22	Yes	23	15	12
Texas	25	26	25	25	Yes	27	18	11
Virginia	32	33	33	33	Yes	36	18	23
West Virginia	16	16	17	17	No	17	14	18

Notes: The SREB median is the average of the two SREB median states.
 "NA" indicates not applicable.

¹ These percentages have a margin of error because they are based on a sample of adults. When the change in percentage from 2002 to 2008 exceeds the margin of error, the change is statistically significant. Percentages have been rounded.

² "SREB states as a percent of U.S." may not calculate correctly due to rounding of the figures shown.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2002 to 2008.

Black, Hispanic adults slowly narrow gaps in bachelor's degree attainment

Historically, smaller proportions of black adults than white adults have attained a bachelor's degree or higher in every SREB state. The same is true for Hispanic adults in every SREB state except West Virginia.

The percentage of Hispanic adults with a bachelor's degree in six SREB states exceeded the national percentage for their peers in 2008. In five SREB states, the percentage of black adults with a bachelor's degree exceeded the national percentage for their peers that year. Hispanic adults in the SREB median states exceeded the national attain-

ment rate for their peers, while black adults equaled the rate for their peers nationwide in 2008.

Even with these improvements, **attainment gaps remain between white and Hispanic adults and white and black adults in every SREB state.** However, the number of degrees earned by black and Hispanic students has increased since the mid-1990s, mostly reflecting changes in their proportions of the national population in recent years.

The largest percentage increase in degrees earned by these groups of adults since 1996 occurred at the associate's level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of black adults ages 18 to 64 with an associate's degree increased by 63 percent — or more than 35,000 degrees — from 1996 to 2006. The number of Hispanic adults ages 18 to 64 with an associate's degree nearly doubled nationwide during the same time, adding more than 42,000 degrees. White adults in the same age group earned 62,000 more associate's degrees during this time — an increase of 15 percent since 1996. Still, white adults accounted for almost 500,000 of the nearly 730,000 associate's degrees awarded in that decade.

The number of bachelor's degrees earned by black and Hispanic adults increased from 1996 to 2006, but at lower rates than at the associate's level. Black adults saw the number of bachelor's degrees they received rise by 55 percent, while Hispanic adults had an 84 percent increase, with more than 50,000 additional degrees for each group in the 10-year period. White adults earned nearly 100,000 more bachelor's degrees over the period — a 22 percent increase.

This growth in bachelor's degrees among black, Hispanic and white adults is important. All three groups showed strong gains during the 10-year period. Black and Hispanic adults accelerated their pace in earning degrees, a step in narrowing the gaps between them and their white peers.

Still, white students continue to earn far more bachelor's degrees than either black or Hispanic



All SREB states have large numbers of working-age adults who have earned some college credit but no degree.

students, accounting for more than one million of the 1.5 million bachelor's degrees awarded nationally in 2006. At these rates of degree production, it will be difficult for states to narrow the gaps in attainment by race and ethnic group for some time to come without dramatic changes in both policy and institutional actions.

SREB states need to serve the many adults with some college credit but no degree

Policy-makers in SREB states who want to increase the number of adults in the work force with a college degree need not focus only on recent high school graduates.

All SREB states have large numbers of working-age adults who have earned some college credit but no degree. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey, more than 13.1 million of these adults lived in SREB states, accounting for nearly 37 percent of the 35.6 million working-age adults nationwide with some college credit but no degree.

These individuals are the second-largest group of working-age adults in every SREB state, trailing only high school graduates without any college credit in each state. Many of these adult learners are a semester or less away from completing a college credential.

At least 20 percent of the adult work force in all SREB states had already earned some college credit — but not a degree — in 2008. **By focusing on adults with some college credit, SREB states can begin to increase degree-attainment rates quickly and move toward exceeding the national rate.**



Several SREB states have well-established programs to draw more adults back to college.

Several SREB states — including Kentucky, Louisiana and Oklahoma — have well-established programs to draw more of these adults back to college. SREB's *No Time to Waste* report urges states to develop or expand efforts to help many more adults finish college degrees.

A new website — TheAdultLearner.org — is being created by SREB and funded through Lumina Foundation for Education as a resource to help adults who wish to finish a degree complete a credential at a regionally accredited college or university. The website will begin as a pilot program in the SREB region in 2011. Soon after, it will expand to include the rest of the nation.

Investments in programs to increase education attainment such as TheAdultLearner.org will help increase the number of adults in SREB states with a college degree.

What can you and your state do?

For the last two decades, degree-attainment rates in both the SREB region and the nation have remained flat. Far too few working-age adults — only one in four — currently have a bachelor's degree or higher. Graduation rates for full-time students at public four-year colleges and universities hover above 50 percent. It is time for state leaders to play a more significant role in increasing college completion. The economic development of individual states and the entire SREB region depends in large measure on increases in the education attainment of states' residents.

SREB's 2010 report *No Time to Waste: Policy Recommendations for Increasing College Completion* established an ambitious target for SREB states: **to increase the numbers of students who complete a college degree or certificate so that 60 percent of each state's working-age adults have one of these credentials by 2025.** States can meet this target by finding ways to graduate more students from high school fully prepared for college. They also need to attract more students into college from all groups of high school graduates and help them persist from year to year until they earn degrees. But even these straightforward strategies will not be enough. Success will mean:

- recruiting into college more adults from the work force who have never attempted college;
- bringing back into college adults who have earned some college credit but no degree;
- developing statewide policies on transfer of college credit;
- improving college affordability to enable more students to complete college with less debt;
- taking steps to ensure the success of all students once they enroll, and
- finding ways to do all of this with modest resources.

This report — *Measuring Success by Degrees* — complements *No Time to Waste* by providing a status report for states on college completion. More importantly, it shows what is at stake if states do not begin measuring success by degrees — and certificates. *No Time to Waste* provides recommendations on policies and practices that states can use to increase graduation rates and the numbers of college degrees and high-quality career certificates awarded each year. Its main recommendations follow in the Appendix. Further information and the complete *No Time to Waste* report are available at www.sreb.org.

Recommendations for Improving College Completion

Set Statewide Priority and Direction for Increasing the Numbers of Degrees and Certificates

1. Each state — led by the governor, legislature and state higher education agency — should make college completion a **top priority** and create a **statewide plan** for improvement with detailed goals, roles and responsibilities. The goals should identify specific numbers of bachelor's and associate's degrees and career certificates needed to meet the 2025 target of 60 percent of the population ages 25 to 64 having at least one of these awards.
2. Statewide, system and institutional governing boards should adopt policies that hold post-secondary system leaders and individual institutions' presidents **accountable** for raising both the numbers of degrees and career certificates awarded annually *and* graduation rates.
3. States should identify and require much-improved statewide **measures** to assess degree completion and related performance indicators for all public colleges and universities.
4. States should develop **financing** strategies and other education policies for meeting their college completion goals, and state appropriations for institutions should be tied in part to meeting the goals.

Increase Access to Postsecondary Education

5. States should improve college **affordability** by coordinating their funding, tuition and financial aid policies to enable more students to complete career certificates and degrees.
6. States should ensure that most high school graduates are **ready** to succeed in college and career training.
7. States should ensure that more **adults** return to college and receive the support they need to succeed.

Increase Numbers of Degrees and Completion Rates Through Institutional Actions

8. States should require institutions to make graduation central to their campus cultures and all **institutional actions** and to take specific steps to increase completion rates.

Increase Productivity and Cost-Efficiency in Degree Completion

9. States should support institutional **productivity and cost-efficiency** strategies that reduce students' excess credits toward a degree and result in timely degree completion at lower costs.
10. States should ensure they have a guaranteed statewide **college-transfer system** based on standard, lower-division curriculum requirements recognized by all public community colleges and universities.

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Table 12. "Projections of the Population by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050" (NP2008-T12). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: August 14, 2008. Accessed at — <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/summarytables.html>.

Table 14. "Projections of the Non-Hispanic White Alone Population by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050" (NP2008-T14). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: August 14, 2008. Accessed at — <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/summarytables.html>.

Table 15. "Projections of the Black Alone Population by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050" (NP2008-T15). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: August 14, 2008. Accessed at — <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/summarytables.html>.

Table 17. "Projections of the Asian Alone Population by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050" (NP2008-T17). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: August 14, 2008. Accessed at — <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/summarytables.html>.

Table 20. "Projections of the Hispanic Population (Any Race) by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050" (NP2008-T20). U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. Release Date: August 14, 2008. Accessed at — <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/summarytables.html>.

Challenge to Lead Goals for Education

The reports listed below for each goal, and other reports on the goals, are found at www.sreb.org.

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
Ready to Start: Ensuring High-Quality Prekindergarten in SREB States
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
Set for Success: Improving Reading and Mathematics Achievement in the Early Grades
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
Keeping Middle Grades Students on the Path to Success in High School: Increasing Engagement and Achievement in SREB States
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for post-secondary education and a career.
Getting Students Ready for College and Careers
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
A Smart Move in Tough Times: How SREB States Can Strengthen Adult Learning and the Work Force
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
Measuring Success by Degrees: The Status of College Completion in SREB States
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
Focusing on Student Performance Through Accountability
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
Schools Need Good Leaders Now: State Progress in Creating a Learning-Centered School Leadership System
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
Resolve and Resources to Get a Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Meeting State Needs
12. The state places a high priority on an education system of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.
From Goals to Results: Improving Education System Accountability

These goals are built on the groundbreaking education goals SREB states adopted in 2002 and challenge the 16 SREB states to lead the nation in educational progress.

