Copies of the *Fact Book on Higher Education* are available from the SREB publications office. SREB continuously monitors new comparative data and makes it available on the SREB website: www.sreb.org. The website also features an online edition of the *Fact Book* with links to the latest updates of the tables and individual *Featured Facts* reports for each of the 16 SREB states.
Message from the SREB President

Since I was a small child, I’ve loved a good story. Stories change, but all the good ones allow a reader to “see” it unfold, to grasp how the parts fit together. One of the purposes of the Fact Book on Higher Education is to help states understand their own, and the region’s, story of education.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the 2021 Fact Book on Higher Education shows the South at a critical juncture. The setting is a region poised for growth but challenged by the need for many more people to achieve higher levels of education and thus to power our workforce and economy.

The story opens as the SREB region’s slow, gradual gains in education attainment continue. Six-year graduation rates for bachelor’s degree-seeking students rose four percentage points. Meanwhile, the three-year graduation rates for two-year degree and certificate-seeking students increased nearly eight percentage points. These improvements will contribute to education attainment and help meet workforce demand for skilled employees with postsecondary credentials.

But looking ahead, college enrollment has begun to decline, thanks in part to declining birth rates and rising costs. Undergraduate enrollment in the SREB region decreased overall by almost two percentage points from 2014 to 2019, even before the pandemic. Enrollment changes differed by type of institution, with a four percentage point increase at four-year colleges and universities and a seven percentage point decrease at two-year colleges.

Affording college, and shouldering the resultant debt, continues to be a high hurdle for many students — making it more difficult for colleges to maintain enrollment. The cost of attendance has risen steadily over the last couple of decades, with a short reprieve during the pandemic. And rising student loan debt disproportionately affects students from those population groups historically underrepresented in postsecondary education.

To be clear, we need all students to get to, and through, postsecondary education. Fact Book data sheds light on the elements of access and student success we must focus on to help them do so, which will in turn help the South and the U.S. remain competitive.

Few things are certain these days, but I feel confident that postsecondary education is an engine of economic growth that will help lead our recovery. The Fact Book shows us where the story can go from here. It is important to note that much of the data in this edition was collected just before or at the beginning of the pandemic, so annual updates will tell us more about how the region was affected by, and is recovering from, the pandemic. The Fact Book can help chart our path to a brighter future.

We continue to make the Fact Book and data updates available at SREB.org/FactBook, though we are not providing print copies this year. You can download the book in its entirety or choose the chapters most relevant to you. Also, keep in mind that you can download over 100 Fact Book spreadsheets at SREB.org/FactBook for your own analyses.

At SREB, we believe in the power of data to answer important questions and monitor progress on education goals. We trust that you continue to find the Fact Book a reliable and comprehensive source of insight on the trends we face in improving education. The north star that guides us should be the opportunity for each and every student to follow a path to those rewarding careers that drive our states’ stories — and our economies — forward.

Stephen L. Pruitt, Ph.D.
President
Acknowledgments

The data collected with the SREB-State Data Exchange survey continues to serve as the foundation for the *SREB Fact Book on Higher Education*. SREB-State Data Exchange coordinators from all 16 SREB states are essential to the process of gathering high-quality comparative data on degrees and certificates awarded, student persistence and progression, time- and credits-to-degree, full-time-equivalent enrollment, distance education, dual enrollment, state funding, and tuition and mandatory fees. Without the assistance of the coordinators listed in Appendix B, we would be unable to produce the *Fact Book*.

Many federal agencies and professional organizations are also important sources of data for the *Fact Book*. These include the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine; the American Medical Association; the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources; the Institute for College Access and Success; the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs; the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; the National Science Foundation; the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association; the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; the U.S. Census Bureau; the Washington Office of The College Board; and various offices of the U.S. Department of Education, especially the National Center for Education Statistics, the Office of Postsecondary Education and the Office of Student Financial Assistance.

A team of dedicated, detail-oriented SREB staff work diligently to produce the *Fact Book*. The authors of this year’s edition are Susan Lounsbury, Christiana Datubo-Brown and Hannah Bartlebaugh. They drafted the various pieces of the *Fact Book*, paying attention to the accuracy of the data displayed while crafting the book’s story. Dave Raney, Chief Editor at SREB, provided valuable input on drafts and contributed to the accuracy and readability of the book. Senior Designer and Production Manager, Lety Jones, was responsible for the design and layout of the book. Research Associate Tiffany Harrison helped with the finishing touches on the 2021 edition.
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