



Why Focus on Underserved Students?

How SREB Defines Postsecondary Student Success

The mission of the Southern Regional Education Board is to guide and support states as they advance all levels of education to improve the social and economic vitality of the 16-state region. At the postsecondary level, this entails a deep commitment to student success.

SREB defines student success as increased college access and completion rates for postsecondary credentials leading to a living wage for all adults in the SREB region. This involves a focused effort on student retention, progression and graduation, as well as a clear understanding of how well graduates are prepared to enter the workforce and begin careers after receiving their postsecondary credential.

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This policy brief is one of three covering Postsecondary Student Success, Equity and Inclusion. For more information, please contact stevie.lawrence@sreb.org or visit [SREB.org/completion](https://www.sreb.org/completion).



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Foundational to SREB's mission is the vision of a Southern region in which every student has access to high-quality education opportunities. This emphasis on providing opportunities for all means that it is crucially important to consider student success through a lens of diversity, equity and inclusion. The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines diversity, equity and inclusion in postsecondary as:

- **Diversity:** “Individual differences and group or social differences”
- **Equity:** “The creation of opportunities for historically underserved populations to have equal access to educational programs that can close opportunity gaps in student success and completion”
- **Inclusion:** “The active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity — in the curriculum and in communities with which individuals might connect — in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions”

Emphasizing the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in student success efforts means that SREB promotes evidence-based approaches, disaggregates data by student demographic subgroups and focuses on supporting historically marginalized student populations. To support and advance state and institution-level efforts in the postsecondary arena, SREB convenes and engages policymakers and stakeholders across the public, private and nonprofit sectors to help increase student success and develop a more talented, diverse and well-trained workforce. Our current efforts are focused on three priorities:

1. Build capacity in SREB member states to use and improve open educational resources.
2. Develop collaborative relationships with higher education agencies, legislators and other policymakers to address closing access, equity and diversity gaps in higher education using strategies such as college access programs and services, non-traditional degree pathways and advances in career and technical education.
3. Create partnerships that employ innovative teaching and learning strategies to ensure that college graduates develop employability skills.

Student Success & Economic Vitality in the SREB Region

Now more than ever, a postsecondary credential is a requirement for accessing high-paying employment opportunities. Postsecondary student success efforts that help students not only get into but through college are crucial in ensuring that states are economically competitive.

A 2019 analysis from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that occupations requiring a postsecondary credential for entry are projected to grow faster than occupations that do not. Furthermore, SREB's *The Pandemic's Threat for Vulnerable Workers* found that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated workforce automation, projecting that by 2025 nearly one-third of work activities could be automated across the region. Low-skilled adults with high school diplomas or less are increasingly likely to be unemployable or stuck in low-wage jobs if they do not raise their education levels.

In the SREB region, specific focus must be placed on increasing student success at the postsecondary level for Black, Latino, American Indian, low-income, rural and first-generation students to enhance the economic vitality of the South. As policymakers and higher education leaders look to meet the demands of the labor market in the years ahead, they must develop innovative strategies to increase the postsecondary credentials earned by students throughout the region.

Why Focus on These Underserved Student Groups?

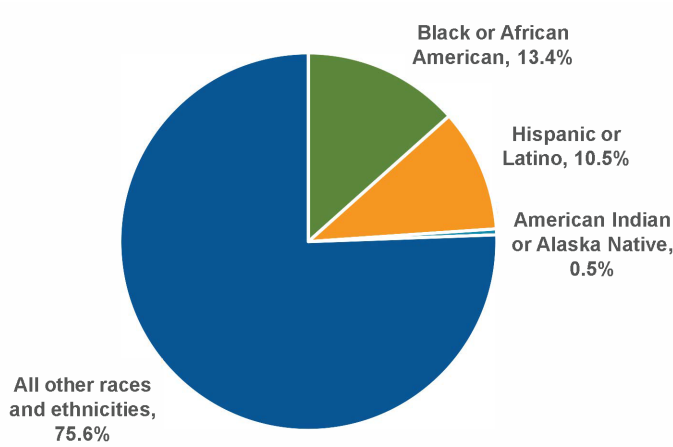
According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2019 there were approximately 162 million jobs in the U.S. Of that total, 47 million (nearly 30%) required an associate degree or higher. The average median annual income was \$41,950. The table below shows median income by education level.

Education Level	Annual Median Income in 2019
Doctoral	\$110,200
Master's	\$78,210
Bachelor's	\$77,920
Associate	\$56,590

The Occupational Employment Statistics Program: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

From 2015 to 2019, 1,036,422 students in the SREB region graduated with a four-year degree, according to data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Of these, 13.4% were Black students, 10.5% were Hispanic or Latino, and 0.5% were American Indian or Alaska Native.

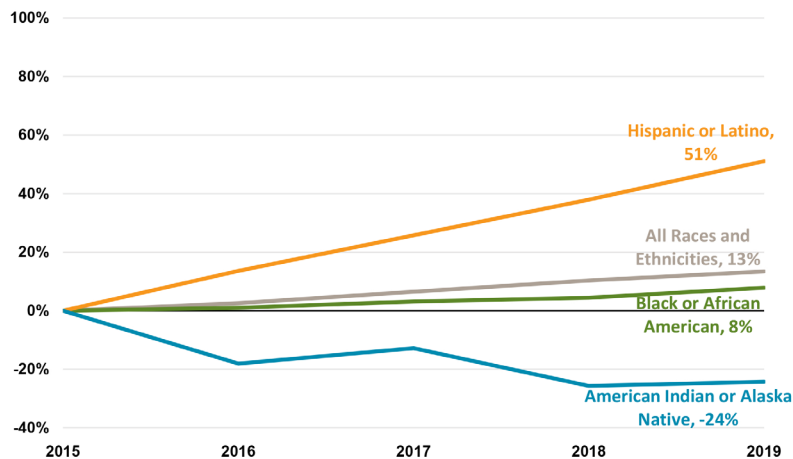
Percentage of College Completers, SREB Region, 2015-2019



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Graduation Rates File, 2015 to 2019, and Directory File, 2015 to 2019

Black students saw an 8% increase in four-year bachelor’s degree attainment between 2015 and 2019, while Hispanic or Latino students achieved a 51% increase over the same time period. American Indian or Alaska Native populations saw a 24% decrease.

Percentage Growth in Bachelor’s Degrees Earned, by Race and Ethnicity, SREB Region, 2015 to 2019

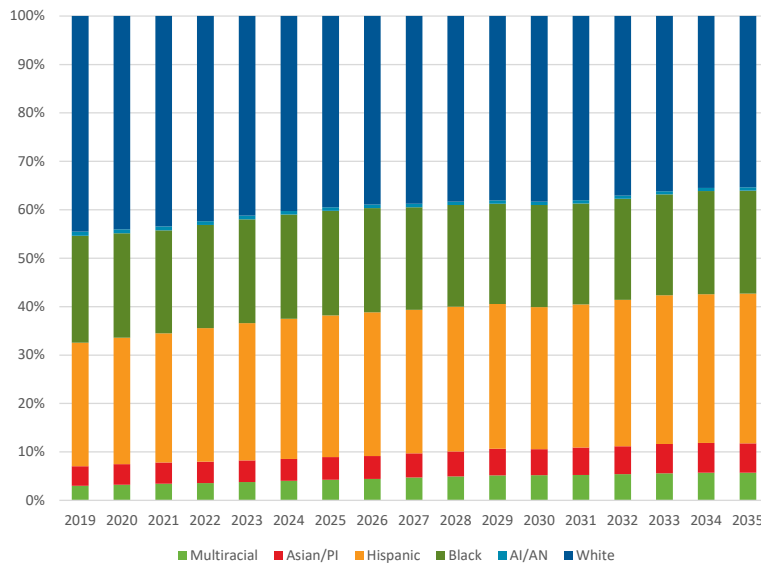


Source: U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Graduation Rates File, 2015 to 2019, and Directory File, 2015 to 2019

The 2020 edition of *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* projects that the number of high school graduates in the South will peak in 2026 at over 1.5 million and decrease to around 1.4 million in 2037. The report predicts that in the Southern region the number of white public high school graduates will decrease 17% between 2019 and 2036. The numbers of Black and American Indian/Alaska Native high school graduates are also expected to decrease during this time, by 26% and 6%, respectively. The numbers of Asian American/Pacific Islander graduates are projected to increase 53%, and Hispanic public high school graduates are projected to grow by 23%.

As a result, white public high school graduates will account for a smaller percentage of the total, and Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic students for a larger share. These demographic shifts highlight the importance of improving the enrollment, retention, progression and graduation rates for students from historically underrepresented groups in postsecondary education to better prepare a state's workforce.

Projected Share of Public High School Graduates by Race and Ethnicity, Southern Region, 2019-20 to 2035-36



Source: Bransberger, P., Falkenstern, C., and Lane, P. (December 2020), *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Identifying barriers to the successful completion of a postsecondary credential is critical in helping states in the SREB region reach their college completion goals. One of the largest hurdles for many prospective college students is finances, and college tuition and fees currently outpace gains in household annual income for many families.

Students from low-income, minority and rural backgrounds — as well as first-generation students — may have family or work responsibilities that conflict with their commitment to completing postsecondary education. Students from these groups can also lack the knowledge to navigate the college landscape. As a result, many may struggle with completing the steps necessary to enroll and persist in college.

Increasingly, the students of the SREB region come from groups historically underserved by postsecondary education. Only by focusing on the specific barriers these students face will we be able to raise postsecondary attainment to meet the needs of employers and state economies and increase prosperity for graduates.

Sources

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