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The Demographics of College Students

The composition of college students has changed dramatically over the last one hundred years. Where as it was once virtually unheard of to see a woman in universities, they are now a majority. Where those of higher socioeconomic status once tread, those of various ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses now walk. However, all the changes have not been for the better. For example, evidence suggests that grade inflation may be a serious problem, while the cost of a higher education has reached almost unmanageable levels. The present paper will analyze various demographics of present day college students along with some comparisons to the past, for the fact of the matter is that college students are changing, and this has an enormous impact, therefore, on how they should be taught by their teachers.

Between 1987 and 1997, enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 14 percent. Despite this dramatic increase, enrollment rose again between 1997 and 2007 at a rate (26 percent) that was almost double that of the previous decade leading to 18.2 million people being enrolled in college (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). The vast majority of this growth, between 1997 and 2007, was in full time enrollment. The number of full-time students increased by 34 percent, while the number of part-time students rose by 15 percent (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). Despite the changes, however, the percentage of college students aged 18-24 years remained roughly the same with 37 percent in 1997 and 39 percent in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). This general trend of increase in undergraduate enrollment began to show in the 1970s, and has, with a few exceptions, been

consistent up to the present day. The same trend of increase has also been evident in both graduate and professional schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b).

However, while the number of women enrolled in colleges rose by 29 percent from 1997 to 2007, the number of men enrolled in college only increased by 22 percent (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). In fact, today women now make up the majority of college students at 57 percent despite the fact that there are more men than women aged 18-24 years in the United States today—15 million versus 14.2 million according to a Census Bureau estimate in 2000 (Marklein, 2005). Furthermore, women appear to be more likely to graduate, as 62 percent of the undergraduate degrees conferred in the 2007-2008 school year went to women (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). This drop in male enrollment is seen in virtually all ethnicities, income groups, and fields of study; furthermore, this decline in male college students, which began in the late 1970s, is only expected to continue (Marklein, 2005). This leads to concern as the blue-collar jobs that once attracted male high school graduates are beginning to disappear. (Marklein, 2005)

The percentage of college students who are minorities has also been increasing over the years. Only 15 percent of college students in 1976 were minorities versus the 32 percent seen in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). This demographic change can be largely attributed to the rising number of Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander students seen at universities today. The percentage of Asian and Hispanic students rose from 2 percent to 7 percent and 4 percent to 11 percent from 1976 to 2007 respectively (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b).

As enrollment levels rise, concerns about grade inflation increase. Over the last fifty years, Grade Point Averages (GPAs) have increased by roughly 0.1 to 0.2 per decade (Rojastaczer, 2002). Furthermore, this rate of change has been high for schools with high average GPAs and low at schools with low average GPAs. This has led to the gap between high and low GPA schools increasing at a steady rate over this time period. However, while grade inflation has been slightly higher at high GPA private schools, the schools with the highest rates of contemporary grade inflation tend to be moderately selective liberal arts colleges, though this may be due to the fact that most of the highly selective colleges were close to crossing or had already crossed the 3.5 GPA mark by 2006 (Rojastaczer, 2002). If this trend holds, the A will become the average at most of the highly selective private colleges and universities in the United States within the next decade (Rojastaczer, 2002).

To give some examples, C's now make up less than 10 percent of all grades at Duke University, by no means a leader in grade inflation. This is in comparison to 1969 when the once respectable C was given more than one-quarter of the time. Furthermore, A's overcame B's to become the most popular grade in the early 1990s. At Pomona College, C's now make up less than 4 percent of all grades, while grades in the A range consist of about half of all grades given at Pomona, Duke, Harvard, and Columbia. Even at the University of Illinois, at state school, over 40 percent of all the grades given are A's, which outnumber C's by almost three to one. To help put things in perspective, only about 2 percent of all grades given at Duke, Pomona, Harvard, and elsewhere consists of D's and F's combined. (Rojastaczer, 2003)

There have been many reasons put forth to help explain this trend in grade inflation. However, despite some arguments to the contrary, there is no evidence that students have improved in quality nationwide since the 1980s (Rojastaczer, 2002). Furthermore, while an oft-

cited reason for grade inflation in the 1960s was the kindness of faculty members toward students trying to avoid the military draft during the Vietnam War, this does not explain the continual increase in GPAs since (Rojastaczer, 2002). Perhaps the most compelling explanation for grade inflation from the 1980s to the present day is the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. As students are paying more for their “product” (education) every year, they want to receive a reward of a good grade for their purchase. As a result, it appears that professors are not only grading easier, but also watering down their course content (Rojastaczer, 2002). This is evident by the fact that students are studying less than ever and are less literate while their grades rise (Rojastaczer, 2002).

Furthermore, the cost of education today is indeed staggering. The cost to attend a public 4-year institution during the 1980-1981 school year was \$6,233 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). The price to attend a public 4-year institution had more doubled, however, by the 2008-2009 school year to be an average of \$14,060 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). Furthermore, if one were to convert everything into today’s dollars, the cost would be \$2,550 versus \$14,456 respectively (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). Moreover, private 4-year institutions have not fared any better. During the 1980-1981 school year it cost \$13,670 or \$5,594 in today’s dollars to attend a 4-year private institution (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). This price had also more than double by the 2008-2009 school year to be an average of \$31,267 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c).

The cost of education has led to many students being in debt when they leave college. The average graduate owes \$19,000, while many undergraduates have debts exceeding \$40,000

(Block, 2006). As a result, many graduates put off saving for retirement, getting married, buying homes, and putting aside money for their own children's education (Block, 2006). To make matters worse, there are few options for those students today who do not want to borrow at high rates. Even 25 years ago, a student who wanted to avoid debt could use money from part-time and summer jobs to help pay for college. However, since then, college tuition has risen at twice the rate of consumer prices (Block, 2006). To put things in perspective, in 1981 a student could work full time all summer long at minimum wage and still earn enough for about two-thirds of his or her annual college costs (Block, 2006). Today, however, a student earning minimum wage would have to work full time for one year and save every penny in order to afford a year of education at a four-year public university (Block, 2006).

In terms of financial aid, 80 percent of full-time students received some form of aid (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). Over half, 64 percent, received grants, 53 percent took out student loans, and 14 percent had the opportunity for work-study (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). This amounted to the average financial aid package equaling \$12,700 for a full-time undergraduate student, with an average of \$7,100 being awarded in grants, \$8,000 taken out in student loans, and \$2,300 received from work study (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). Of this, the federal government contributed an average of \$7,900 in total financial aid, \$3,700 in grants, \$5,400 in student loans, and \$2,200 in work-study to full-time undergraduate students. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a).

The difference in income between those who obtain a college degree and those who begin to work right out of college has also changed over the years. The median annual earnings of a

full-time male aged 25 to 34 who had merely obtained a high school diploma or GED was roughly \$42,200 in the 1980s (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). A male in the 1980s who had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher could roughly expect to make \$52,300 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). In other words, in the 1980s a man who earned a bachelor's degree could expect to make about 24 percent more than a man who had merely completed high school or gotten his GED. Meanwhile, the median annual earnings of a full-time female aged 25 to 34 who had merely obtained a high school diploma or GED was roughly \$ 28,700 in the 1980s, and \$38,800 for a woman who had received a bachelor degree or higher (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). Essentially, those women who only obtained their GED or high school diploma made roughly 26 percent less than those women who received a college degree in 1980.

By the year 2008, however, the difference in the median annual earnings of both men and women aged 25 to 34 had changed. For one thing, by the year 2008, those who had obtained a college degree were making on average almost twice as much as someone who had only received a GED or high school diploma. The averaged male who had obtained a college degree made \$55,000 in 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). The average man who received only a GED or high school diploma made only \$32,000 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). Furthermore, while the average salary remained roughly the same for a college graduate, the average salary for someone who had only received a GED or high school diploma actually went down. A similar pattern is apparent for women as well. In 2008, a woman who had received a bachelor's degree or higher made \$45,000 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,

2010a). This is higher than a woman with the same level of schooling would have made in 1980.

A woman working in 2008 with only a high school degree or GED, however, could only expect to earn an average of \$25,000, less than she would have most probably made in 1980 (U.S.

Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a).

Although many things have changed in higher education over the years, at least one thing would appear to have not dramatically: how prepared students are for a higher education after high school according to SAT and ACT scores. The average student's SAT math scores have increased by 15 points from a 500 in 1990 to a 515 in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). The average student's SAT critical reading score, however, has not really improved from being 499 in 1990 and 501 in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). During the 2008-2009 school year, Caucasians scored the highest on the SAT critical reading test with a 528, while African Americans scored the lowest with an average score of 429, almost one hundred points lower (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). Asian/Pacific Islanders, however, score the highest on the SAT math test with a 587 and are followed by Caucasians with an average score of 536 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). African Americans, again, have the lowest score on the Math section of the SAT with an average of 426; this is over 150 points lower than the average score of an Asian/Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b).

In 1997, the average male's composite ACT score was a 21.1, while the average woman's score in the same year was a 20.8 (The 1997 ACT High School Profile Report, 2008). As in most years since, on average, men scored higher than women on the science section (with average

scores of 21.7 and 20.6 respectively) and on the math section (with an average score of 21.3 versus 20.1) (The 1997 ACT High School Profile Report, 2008). Women, however, scored higher on the English section with an average of 20.7 compared to men's average score of 19.9, and on the reading section with an average score of 21.5 compared to men's 21.2 (The 1997 ACT High School Profile Report, 2008). The average score today, which has remained steady since 2004, is 20.9. Men still tend to score higher on average with a 21.1 compared to women's average score of 20.9 ("National data release," 2006).

Furthermore, the number of ACT tested students has actually increased by 11 percent nationally since 2001 ("National data release," 2006). The number of minorities who take the ACT has also increased from 24 percent in 2001 to 27 percent in 2005 ("National data release," 2006). The number of Hispanics taking the ACT has increased by 40 percent since 2001, while the number of African Americans taking the ACT has increased by 23 percent since 2001 ("National data release," 2006). More women than men now take the ACT with 56 percent of those who took the test in 2005 being female ("National data release," 2006). Asians typically score the highest on the ACT with an average score of 22.1 with Caucasians coming in at a close second with an average score of 21.9 ("National data release," 2006). Native Americans have an average score of 18.7, while Hispanics and African Americans have an average score of 18.6 and 17 respectively ("National data release," 2006).

On the whole, it would appear that minorities are gradually becoming more prepared for college. Also, it would seem that while overall knowledge in math has increase somewhat, English or language knowledge has not. Furthermore, men would still appear to be more prepared for college than women according to the SAT and ACT. This, however, brings the reliability of these tests into question, as it would appear that women are actually more prepared and successful

in college than men these days. Moreover, the ACT and SAT highlight just how far is left to go to provide an equal educational background to minorities before they enter university.

However, although students appear to be as prepared for college these days as they have been in the past, once they finally get to college they are spending considerably less time on academic activities. In 1961 the average, full-time student spent 40 hours a week on academic work; this included both class time and studying (Bartlett, 2010). In 2003, however, the average full-time student spent merely 27 hours a week in class and studying (Bartlett, 2010).

Furthermore, it has been estimated that, on average, 21st century students spend 10 hours less studying every week than their 1961 counterparts (Bartlett, 2010). This means, essentially, that over the course of the average student's four-year college career, the current student spends roughly 1,500 less hours studying today than a student in 1961.

Furthermore, a correlation has recently been found between a student's Facebook use and his or her GPA. College students who use Facebook actually spend less time studying and have lower grade point averages than those students who do not have a social networking site (Grabmeier, 2009). Moreover, three-quarters of Facebook users claimed that their use of a social networking site did not interfere with their studies (Grabmeier, 2009). Although one cannot claim for certain that the use of Facebook leads to lower grades and less studying, it is clear that there is a disconnect between student's claim that Facebook use does not impact their studies and the students' actual grades and studying time. The typical Facebook user had a GPA somewhere between a 3.0 and a 3.5, while non-users tended to have GPAs between 3.5 and 4.0 (Grabmeier, 2009). In addition, Facebook users claimed to study an average of one to five hours a week. Non-Facebook users, meanwhile, studied an average of 11 to 15 hours a week (Grabmeier, 2009).

One study found that 85 percent of undergraduates used Facebook, while only 52 percent of graduate students had accounts (Grabmeier, 2009). Furthermore, while those students who had paying jobs were less likely to use Facebook, those who were heavily involved in extracurricular activities at school were more likely to use it (Grabmeier, 2009). In addition, science, technology, engineering, math (STEM), and business majors were more likely to use Facebook than those majoring in the social sciences and humanities (Grabmeier, 2009). At the same time, however, STEM majors spend more time on the Internet than other students, which may be at least part of the reason why they have a tendency to spend more time on Facebook (Grabmeier, 2009). Interestingly enough, there were no differences in the use of Facebook between men or women or among various races and ethnicities, though younger and full-time students were more likely to use Facebook (Grabmeier, 2009). Also, the significant link between lower GPA and Facebook use was also found in graduate students, which is surprising as graduate students generally have GPAs above 3.5 (Grabmeier, 2009).

There have been many changes in the past sixty years in higher education. The basic demographics of college students have changed such as their ages, sex, and ethnicities. It would also appear to be more necessary to go to college these days as well. This is especially interesting as it is now more expensive to attend college than ever; the price of both public and private universities has more than doubled. To make matters more complicated, many universities and colleges are now battling major grade inflation problems, while students seem to be studying less. Meanwhile, the impact of the many new technologies on college students has yet to be fully assessed and understood. The fact of the matter is that college students are changing. This is especially important as this, in turn, will affect how their professors should teach them.

Resources

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