

Oct. 31

## Closing the College Achievement Gap

The inexorable rush to rankings glory, which tends to reward colleges and universities the more academically selective and wealthy they become, has not been good for low-income and minority students. By now the statistics are pretty well known: About half of Americans from low-income backgrounds go on to attend college, compared to about two-thirds of middle income Americans and 80 percent of those with large incomes. Barely two in five black and Hispanic freshmen earn a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college, compared to about 60 percent of white freshmen and 64 percent of Asian Americans. And white Americans are twice as likely as black Americans and three times as likely as Hispanic Americans to have earned a bachelor's degree by the age of 29.

Numerous colleges and university systems have undertaken individual efforts in recent years to try to improve the situation, pouring millions into their financial aid budgets to [replace needy students' loans with grants](#) and adding or greatly expanding programs to reach out to minority students who might not otherwise see college in their futures, [as at California State University](#).

And yet the gaps in college access and educational outcomes remain in force, at a time when the populations lagging behind are growing at a significantly faster clip than those leading – a recipe for disaster, says William E. (Brit) Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland. “If higher education isn't successful in closing this achievement gap, our nation is going to suffer tremendously.”

Kirwan and 18 other leaders of state college and university systems are unveiling a plan today aimed at doing just that. As part of [“Access to Success,” a joint effort of the National Association of System Heads and the Education Trust](#), a nonprofit group that advocates for the “high academic achievement of all students at all levels,” the public college systems all have agreed to cut in half within eight years their own gaps in college-going and college graduation rates for low-income students and those from underrepresented minority groups.

The systems, a list of which appears at the bottom of this article, will begin publicly reporting uniform data on the rate at which low-income and minority students and other students in their states enroll in system institutions and the rates at which the low-income and minority students who enter the institutions earn degrees. At least some of that data, particularly the college-going and graduation rates by income level, have not traditionally been reported before.

Each university system will craft its own plan to cut its gaps in half by 2015, and officials from the 19 systems – which as a group educate about 2 million students, about 12 percent of the nation’s total and about a third of all low-income and minority undergraduates at four-year colleges — will work together to share ideas about and attack some of the underlying issues that affect all of them: managing costs so that colleges have more funds to spend on things that directly help students succeed, with the help of Jane Wellman and the Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs; redesigning and improving introductory and remedial courses that can knock students off the track, aided by the [National Center for Academic Transformation](#); aligning high school and college curriculums so more students are prepared to enter higher education, building on the work of the [American Diploma Project](#); and bolstering need-based financial aid. The collaborative work will be conducted under the aegis of the system heads’ group and Education Trust, with analysis by their staffs, and will be financed by the Lumina and Gates Foundations.

The collective nature of the new effort, and the fact that the university systems will be laying out their records and committing to clearcut goals in a set period of time, are what distinguish it from previous ones, leaders of the initiative say.

“Here you have 20 systems committing to being public about where they stand and public about the results,” said Thomas Meredith, commissioner of higher education for the Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning in Mississippi. “We’ll keep pressure on ourselves to pull this off. This will not be just another effort that people will have forgotten.”

Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, emphasized the extent to which the new data that the college systems have agreed to report will shed significant new light on the extent of the problem. While the federal government and most colleges and universities do a good job of reporting on the relative access to and success of students by race, relatively little information is available, either nationally or locally, on students based on financial status.

That will change under the new program. The participating university systems will report on the number of the proportion of new freshmen and transfer students who receive Pell Grants (and how those proportions compare to the proportions of high-school graduates who come from low-income backgrounds), as well on the proportion of their Pell Grant recipients who graduated within four, five and six years (or the equivalent for two-year institutions). (A list of the metrics the systems will use to report the new data [can be found here.](#)) Thomas Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education and a leading expert on the status of low-income students, applauded the new initiative for planning to report the graduation rates of Pell recipients — “something the feds should and could have done ... long ago, but didn’t,” he wrote in an e-mail message.

Each university system has particular gaps that it hopes to close. Meredith of Mississippi noted that 79 percent of white freshmen at the state’s public colleges return for a second year, while the rate is 68.9 percent for black students. The system aims to cut that gap in half by 2015 — though it hopes to do so, Meredith noted, while continuing to raise the retention rate for white students.

The State University of New York hopes to increase the proportion of underrepresented minority students at its two- and four-year campuses by about 50 percent during the eight-year period, said Pedro Cabán, who was hired as the university system’s vice provost for diversity and educational equity this summer, in part, to help it carry out the Access to Success effort. Cabán said SUNY’s budget for the coming fiscal year may seek funds for two new grant programs designed to attract minority and low-income students to science and math and to slightly broaden eligibility for the university’s [Educational Opportunity Program](#).

Kirwan of the Maryland system noted a 15 percent systemwide gap between the college graduation rate for black, Hispanic and American Indian students and for white students, though he noted that some of the campuses — such as Towson University and the University of Maryland Baltimore County — have “basically no gap.” Kirwan said he expected that at a statewide conference that Maryland plans next month to begin its part of the Access to Success effort, officials from Towson and UMBC will show their peers how “they have been successful in essentially closing the gap.”

Kirwan said he thought Maryland and others would probably struggle more with the goals related to raising the rates at which underrepresented students go to college in the first place, since so much of that depends on what happens at the elementary and secondary level. “Closing the graduation rates gap is much more in our control,” the Maryland chancellor said. “We realize the other is not going to be easy, but we have some optimism that with a concerted effort, we can do it. We know we have to try.”

While both Kirwan and Meredith said they were pleased that 19 university systems had decided to join the new effort — a full list of them is below — they both acknowledged that dozens of others (the system heads’ group has 55 members altogether, [a list of which appears here](#)) had opted not to at this point. “Lots of others are doing bits and pieces, but only these 19 stepped up to say, ‘We’re in and we’re in all the way,’ ” said Meredith. He said he suspected that others would join later, but said others might be daunted by the “awful big undertaking” and the public nature of the endeavor.

“We in higher education don’t necessarily like to expose ourselves in this way,” he said.

Haycock, of Education Trust, said the university systems, because they educate a large proportion of the country’s undergraduates, have as good a chance as anyone to try to re-balance a conversation about “excellence” in higher education that tends to focus on selectivity and wealth.

“We need to get out of this rat race toward exclusivity that people have been on,” including some of the flagship campuses that are part of the university systems in question, Haycock said. “If somebody’s going to turn this ship, and make equity more important, they’re well positioned to do it.”

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The list of participating institutions:

California State University System  
City University of New York  
Connecticut State University System  
State University System of Florida  
University of Hawaii System  
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education  
University of Louisiana System  
University of Maine System  
University System of Maryland  
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities  
Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning  
University of Missouri System  
Montana University System  
University of Puerto Rico System  
Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education  
South Dakota Board of Regents

Southern University and A&M College System  
State University of New York  
Vermont State Colleges

— [Doug Lederman](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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*Today's News*

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# 19 College Systems Will Measure Progress in Educating Minority and Needy Students

By [PETER SCHMIDT](#)

Washington

A group of 19 college systems in 16 states and Puerto Rico plans to announce today a new effort to drastically improve the education of minority and low-income students, partly by submitting data for annual reports documenting how well they are closing achievement gaps.

The new undertaking is being mounted by the National Association of System Heads with technical help from the Education Trust and financial support from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The participating systems, which together serve about a third of the low-income and minority students enrolled at the nation's four-year public colleges, have as their goal reducing gaps in college-going and college-success rates by at least half by 2015.

As part of their effort, called "Access to Success," the systems have agreed to collect and publish some information that has never been publicly available before, including the graduation rates of nontraditional and low-income students.

"The future of our nation demands more college graduates, and I'm pleased that our partners in university systems across the country are committed to meeting this challenge," Thomas C. Meredith, Mississippi's commissioner of higher education and the president of the National Association of System Heads, said in a written statement announcing the endeavor.

Just 18 percent of black students and 11 percent of Hispanic students now earn bachelor's degrees by age 24, compared with 34 percent of white students, the statement said. Just 9 percent of low-income students earn bachelor's degrees by age 24, compared with 75 percent of students from economically privileged backgrounds.

## Sense, Sensibility, and Incentives

Ross Wiener, the Education Trust's vice president for program and policy, said the systems had come together partly because they wanted to develop ways to measure their own success, rather than sitting back and letting standards be set for them by government agencies or magazines that publish college rankings. "Many of them are frustrated with how the rankings play out and what those rankings incentivize," Mr. Wiener said, noting that several measures used by ranking systems have the effect of punishing colleges for serving substantial numbers of students who are disadvantaged.

Among the areas the effort will focus on are increasing student success in remedial and introductory courses,

managing college costs, improving how well entering students are prepared for colleges, and helping low-income students get more access to financial aid.

The 19 college systems involved are: the California State University system; the Connecticut State University system, the State University System of Florida, the University of Hawaii system, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the University of Louisiana system, the Southern University and A&M College system (in Louisiana), the University of Maine system, the University System of Maryland, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, the University of Missouri system, the Montana University system, the City University of New York, the State University of New York, the University of Puerto Rico system, the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education, the South Dakota Board of Regents, and the Vermont State College system.

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