

COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Characteristics, Experiences, and Outcomes



Kristen A. Renn and Robert D. Reason

SECOND EDITION

Stylus

STERLING, VIRGINIA



COPYRIGHT © 2021 BY STYLUS PUBLISHING, LLC.

Published by Stylus Publishing, LLC.
22883 Quicksilver Drive
Sterling, Virginia 20166-2019

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, recording, and information storage and retrieval, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-128-5 (cloth)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-129-2 (paperback)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-130-8 (library networkable e-edition)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-131-5 (consumer e-edition)

Printed in the United States of America

All first editions printed on acid-free paper
that meets the American National Standards Institute
Z39-48 Standard.

Bulk Purchases
Quantity discounts are available for use in workshops and
for staff development.
Call 1-800-232-0223

First Edition, 2012

CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

While it's still much too early to draw conclusions, initial signs suggest that post-Millennials are on track to become the most well-educated generation yet.

(Fry & Parker, 2018, p. 8)

As we write this chapter, in May 2020, the world is experiencing a pandemic the likes of which has not been seen in our lifetimes. The economy of the United States, and much of the world, has been virtually shut down. Unemployment rates have reached recession-era levels. As we write, heated discussions are occurring about whether to open the economy at the risk of human lives; similarly, heated discussions are occurring about how, or if, to “open” higher education for the fall semester. Higher education institutions never closed, but colleges and universities quickly transitioned from face-to-face instruction to online instruction during the spring semester of 2020. The question for higher education at this point is how to safely deliver instruction, and the college experience, in the coming years.

Projections about student enrollments should always be viewed critically and with much skepticism. Current understanding of who is enrolling in higher education is out of date before it is published; projections are based on previous behaviors along with assumptions about how those behaviors will change over time. The data on which we base the discussion in this chapter was collected before the pandemic of 2020 hit. The pandemic that hit the world in 2020 renders most of the assumptions about student behavior void, or at least tenuous. The reader should engage with the following discussion critically and with the understanding that, as we write, we do not know what the pandemic, the economic crash, and eventual recovery will mean for higher education in the coming years.

We began our original text with a quotation from Debard (2004), who indicated that the then current generation of college students was “the most racially and ethnically diverse in this nation’s history” (p. 33). Even as we move into the next generation of college students—from millennial students to post-millennial students—we

can begin with the same idea. The current generation of college students are “on track to be the most diverse, best-educated generation yet,” according to research by the Pew Research Center (Fry & Parker, 2018, p. 3). This is good news for society and for higher education. That said, overall undergraduate enrollment in higher education institutions in the United States is projected to either stagnate or decrease slightly over the next decade (Hussar & Bailey, 2009; Snyder et al., 2019).

In the following sections, we discuss first enrollment trends and projections followed by specific discussions of several social identity groups. We have chosen to present groups of students as distinct, both to simplify presentation and for ease in comprehension. We readily acknowledge the inherent limitations of this approach as well. Current understanding of how students’ various and multiple identity statuses affect their higher education outcomes and experiences reveals that a nuanced understanding of the intersection of various identities is needed (see Torres et al., 2009). Wherever possible in this chapter we highlight intersections of identities, as these intersections affect an understanding of who is coming to higher education, but we strongly encourage the reader to look for these intersections. Although it is true, for example, to say the college-going rates of Latinx students have increased substantially in the last decade, acknowledging that much of this growth is driven by women (Latinas) is both more accurate and nuanced. For those readers who wish to explore more deeply the demographic trends presented here, we draw attention to the list of resources at the end of this chapter.

Trends in Overall Enrollment

The United States has seen growth in the number of students enrolling in higher education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that between 2000 and 2018, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased from 15.3 million to 19.8 million, a 19% increase (Snyder et al., 2019). Undergraduate students made up the vast majority of enrollments: 16.8 million undergraduates were enrolled in 2018. Much of this growth is driven by populations of students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Even with this overall increase in enrollment over the first 2 decades of the 21st century, the trend in recent years has been downward. Peak enrollment was in 2010, when approximately 21 million students were enrolled in U.S. higher education (Snyder et al., 2019). Using data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, Hussar and Bailey (2019) and Snyder et al. (2019) provide a complicated and nuanced projection of enrollments over the next decade. Overall student enrollment in higher education is projected to increase, although at a lower rate of increase than in previous decades; Snyder et al. project that overall enrollment in U.S. higher education will increase to 20.4 million students in 2027, even as undergraduate enrollment is expected to plateau or decrease (Hussar et al., 2020).

Not all enrollment projections are as promising, however. Data from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) suggest that overall the

annual number of high school graduates in the United States has leveled off after a decade of continued growth and will decline precipitously starting about 2025 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Even though Bransberger and Michelau caution against using the WICHE projections to forecast higher education enrollments, their projections certainly foretell a decline in first-time, first-year enrollments over the next decade.

Nathan Grawe (2018) developed and introduced the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI), which accounts for both regional difference in demand and institutional prestige when predicting future enrollment. Grawe predicts that, on average, 4-year institutions will see modest growth between 2020 and 2025, followed by a steep decline in the number of students enrolling in higher education starting after 2025. The HEDI allows Grawe, however, to provide a fine-grained prediction of which institutions are going to be most affected. In particular, Grawe predicts that elite institutions—those ranked in the top 50 institutions nationally—will experience only a modest decline in enrollment, compared to institutions ranked between 51 and 100 and unranked regional institutions, which will see significant declines in enrollment starting in 2025. The brunt of the declines will be felt by institutions in the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, with institutions in the Southwest experiencing some potential increase in enrollments.

Grawe (2018) predicts similar declines in enrollments among 2-year institutions. Unlike some 4-year institutions, which draw students from across the nation and world, 2-year institutional students are almost exclusively local or regional, which make these institutions more susceptible to decreases in population and demands for higher education. Whereas elite, 4-year institutions may be able to buttress decreases through recruiting nationally and internationally, 2-year institutions have a smaller geographic area from which to make up decreases in demand. As a result, Grawe (2018) predicts that “the expected rate of contraction in two-year enrollments is almost 20 percent faster than for college enrollment in general” (p. 66).

Undergraduate Enrollment

We turn our focus now to undergraduate student enrollments. Because undergraduate students constitute the vast majority of total postsecondary enrollment, the trends in undergraduate enrollment follow—and dictate—the trends mentioned briefly earlier. Undergraduate student enrollment had been increasing through the first decade of the 21st century (Aud, Hussar, et al., 2010). Between 2000 and 2010, for example, total undergraduate enrollment increased 37.5%, from 13.2 million students in 2000 to 18.1 million students in 2010 (Snyder et al., 2019). By 2018, however, undergraduate enrollment had decreased to 16.6 million students, a decrease of slightly more than 7% (Hussar et al., 2020). Projections through 2027 suggest that undergraduate enrollment will rebound from current numbers to 17 million students, a total still below the 2010 enrollments we reported in the previous volume of this text.

TABLE 1.1
Undergraduate Student Enrollment Trends (in millions) 2000–2018

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total 2-year enrollment</i>	<i>Total 4-year enrollment</i>	<i>4-year, public enrollment</i>	<i>4-year, private (not-for-profit) enrollment</i>
2000	5.9	7.2	4.8	2.2
2010	7.7	10.4	6.5	2.6
2018	5.7	10.8	7.5	2.8

Source: Adapted from National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.).

Changes in overall undergraduate enrollment are not evenly distributed across all sectors of American higher education (see Table 1.1; Aud, Hussar, et al., 2010; Snyder et al., 2019). Two-year institutions saw a 27% increase in enrollment between 2000 and 2010, whereas 4-year institution enrollment increased by 47.2%. Between 2010 and 2018, enrollment at 2-year institutions decreased 25%, whereas 4-year enrollment increased slightly (Hussar et al., 2020). Much of the growth in the 4-year sector is driven by growth in enrollments at public institutions.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Enrollment trends related to the racial and ethnic diversity of college students in the United States show an increasing proportion of students of color on college campuses (see Table 1.2). The growth has been driven by both changes in the demographics of the U.S. population, which is becoming much less White, as well as changes in the college-going rates of several racial and ethnic groups, particularly Latinx students (Hussar et al., 2020; Pryor et al., 2007). The distribution of racial groups across the United States is not geographically even, so many of the trends described in this section do not apply to all institutions equally. For example, the Latinx population made up 16.3% of the total U.S. population in 2010 (up from 12.5% in 2000), but approximately 41% of Latinx census respondents reside in the western United States, and only 9% reside in the Midwest (Ennis et al., 2011). Growth in enrollment of Latinx students, therefore, will be greater in institutions in western states.

The percentage of postsecondary students who are White has decreased over the last several decades. In 1976 White students represented 82% of all college students; in 2008 White students made up 63% (Aud, Hussar, et al., 2010). By 2018, White students constituted 52% of undergraduates (Hussar et al., 2020). Whereas the number of White students in higher education was growing even as the proportion of White students was decreasing through 2010, the percentage decrease in White undergraduate students translated into a decrease in the actual number of White students in higher education, from nearly 11 million in 2010 to 8.7 million in 2018.

Compare the decrease in the proportion and number of White students to increases in the representation of students from other racial and ethnic groups and a picture of

TABLE 1.2
Enrollment by Sex and Race

	2000		2010		2018		Percent change 2000 to 2018*
	Total enrollment	Percent of enrollment	Total enrollment	Percent of enrollment	Total enrollment	Percent of enrollment	
Total undergraduates	13,155,393	100.0%	18,082,427	100.0%	16,610,235	100.0%	26.3%
Female	7,377,125	56.1%	10,246,145	56.6%	9,384,236	56.1%	27.2%
Male	5,232,467	43.9%	7,836,282	43.4%	7,225,999	43.8%	38.1%
African American/Black	1,548,893	11.8%	2,677,086	13.9%	2,127,937	12.81%	37.4%
American Indian/Alaska Native	138,506	1.1%	179,091	1.1%	120,165	0.7%	-13.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	845,545	6.4%	1,087,289	6.8%	1,131,790	6.8%	33.9%
Latinx	1,351,025	10.3%	2,551,000	12.9%	3,352,665	20.2%	148.2%
White	8,983,455	68.3%	10,895,938	63.3%	8,664,500	52.2%	-3.6%
Two or more Races	n/a	n/a	293,700	1.7%	646,500	3.9%	120%

Source: Adapted from Hussar et al. (2020).

greater diversity begins to unfold. Between 2000 and 2018, Asian American student enrollment increased by 34%, African American student enrollment increased by 37%, and Latinx student enrollment increased by 148% (Hussar et al., 2020). The increases in representation among Asian American, African American, and Latinx students is likely to continue to increase.

American Indian and Alaska Native students are a smaller, and often overlooked, population in U.S. higher education. In 2006 American Indians and Alaska Natives accounted for approximately 1.5% of the total U.S. population, concentrated primarily in the western United States (Aud, Hussar, et al., 2010; DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). That same year, American Indian and Alaska Native students made up less than 1% of all students in U.S. higher education (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill). In 2018, the proportion of students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native remains relatively unchanged at approximately 0.7%: Only 120,000 students out of 16.6 million undergraduate college students in 2018 identified as American Indian or Alaska Native students (Hussar et al., 2020).

Finally, a growing number of college students identify as multiracial (Shang, 2008). Jaschik (2006), citing findings from the 2000 Census—the first year individuals were allowed to check more than one box on the demographic question about race—reported that about 40% of the 6.8 million people who identified as multiracial were under the age of 18. As this younger population has aged, the proportion of colleges of which students identify with more than one race has increased. Hussar et al. (2020) reported that 293,700 undergraduate students listed “two or more races” in 2010, compared to 646,500 in 2018—an increase of over 120%. In 2018, multiracial students made up approximately 3.9% of the total undergraduate population.

Students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds tend to enroll in different sectors in higher education, with students of color more highly represented at 2-year and for-profit institutions (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). For example, in 2008 Black students accounted for approximately 11% of all students in public 4-year institutions but 14% of students at public 2-year institutions and 27% of students at for-profit institutions. White students, however, are more likely to attend 4-year, nonprofit, and private institutions. White students make up almost 69% of students at private, nonprofit institutions; only 59% of students at public, 2-year institutions; and 52% of students at for-profit institutions.

International Students

International student enrollment is not evenly distributed across graduate and undergraduate students. The majority of international students enrolled in higher education in the United States are enrolled in graduate programs; in 2018 international students made up approximately 14% of all U.S. graduate students (Hussar et al., 2020). By contrast, international students made up only 3.4% of undergraduates. Unlike other sections of this chapter, in this section we present overall numbers and percentages of enrollment rather than disaggregating between undergraduate and graduate students.

As one would imagine, international student enrollment in U.S. higher education and the number of U.S. students studying abroad are sensitive to global politics. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, U.S. domestic politics leading up to and after the 2016 presidential election, and the current global pandemic did, and will continue to, affect international student enrollment. It took almost 10 years for international student enrollment in U.S. institutions to increase after the terrorist attacks in 2001 (Aud, Hussar, et al., 2010). The effects of recent U.S. domestic politics and the current pandemic on international student enrollments are likely not yet fully felt, and it will certainly take years for enrollments to recover.

Although total enrollment of international students in fall 2018 reached an all-time high, for the fourth year in a row, at almost 1.1 million students (Martel, 2020; Snyder et al., 2019) almost 70% of international students studying at U.S. institutions come from Asian countries. Students from China and India account for 40% of all international students in the United States (Snyder et al., 2019) and were expected to continue to increase prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Beginning after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, however, enrollment of students from Latin American, Central American, and Middle Eastern/North African countries decreased.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has already affected international students' experiences and enrollment in U.S. higher education. In a recent survey of 599 institutions of higher education in the United States, Martel (2020) found 31% of institutions cancelled programs that received international students in spring 2020 because of travel restrictions into the United States. Further, 88% of institutions anticipate decreases in international students in the 2020–2021 academic year, with 30% anticipating a “substantial decrease” (Martel, 2020, p. 11) in the number of international students. The effects of the pandemic on international student enrollment will likely be felt beyond the next academic year as students make decisions about their own comfort studying outside of their home countries.

Sex Differences in Higher Education

Female students became the majority of all students in American higher education in 1979, when they accounted for approximately 51% of all students (Snyder & Dillow, 2009) and have been a “stable majority” ever since (Pryor et al., 2007, p. 4). By 2016, the percentage of female students had increased to 56% of the total undergraduate population (Snyder et al., 2019), although this percentage was down from a high of 57.4% in 2004 (Aud, Fox, et al., 2010). As is the case for almost all groups we have examined, the total number of female students was increasing through about 2011 and has fallen through 2016. For example, there were 10.2 million female undergraduates enrolled in higher education institutions in 2011; in 2018 the total number of female students had decreased to over 9.4 million compared to 7.2 male students in 2018 (Hussar et al., 2020).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Students in Higher Education

Although data tracking the enrollment of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) college students are difficult to find, many higher education experts agree that more students are arriving on college campuses already open about their sexuality and gender expression (Garvey, Sanders, et al., 2017). Estimates of the proportion of college students who identify as LGBQ vary somewhat among the handful of national college student surveys that include opportunities for students to report their sexual orientation. In 2008 the National College Health Assessment added demographic questions related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Subsequently the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) and the CIRP Freshman Survey added them and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) added an option to include these items on an institution-by-institution basis. In an analysis that included data from these surveys, Greathouse and colleagues (2018b) found that about 7.2% of survey respondents identified as “queer-spectrum” in sexual orientation (p. 7). Some institutions (e.g., Ohio State University, State University of New York system, University of California system) have begun to ask optional sexual orientation questions on their admissions application, providing additional evidence to estimate diversity among students’ sexualities at those institutions.

Transgender and Gender Nonbinary Students

Although researchers and practitioners often conflate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer with transgender and gender nonbinary students, it is important to note the distinctions between sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. Briefly, sexuality relates to whom one finds physically or sexually attractive. Gender identity and gender expression relate to how one identifies and presents oneself in terms of masculinity and femininity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The surveys noted above that ask for sexual orientation demographics also ask about gender identity, though not always in exactly the same terms (see Greathouse et al., 2018b). In a national study of the climate for LGBT students in higher education, Rankin et al. (2010) allowed respondents to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight (sexual identity), but also as men, women, transmasculine, or transfeminine (gender identity). Respondents also presented themselves as masculine, feminine, or other (gender expression).

An accurate count of the trans-identifying students in higher education, or in the U.S. population in general, is difficult to ascertain and problematic from both a methodological and social justice perspective (Nicolazzo, 2017). The multistudy analysis conducted by Greathouse et al., (2018b) showed that 0.7% of respondents identified within what the authors called “trans-spectrum” (p. 7) gender identities. In a study in Massachusetts, Conron, et al. (2012) estimated that up to 2% of the population identified as transgender, which could translate into as many as 33,000 (out of 16.6 million) undergraduate students across colleges and universities in the United States. Rankin & Associates Consulting (2014) have reported similar percentage of

students who identify as transgender. Putting the evidence together, it seems reasonable to assume that roughly 1 to 2% of students are transgender or trans-spectrum.

It is more clear, however, that trans-identifying college students face harassment from cisgender peers (Goldberg, 2018; Greathouse et al., 2018b) that can negatively affect their experiences and outcomes in college. Goldberg found that 20% of trans-identifying students who were out, or who were perceived to be transgender, experienced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment during college and that 16% of those students left college because of the harassment. Trans-inclusive and supportive policies, such as gender-appropriate on-campus housing, may support student success. Movement toward inclusive policies, particularly policies that allow students to select preferred personal pronouns, gender, and name on institutional records, may improve student experiences and allow researchers to better account for and understand the experiences of trans-identifying students (Linley & Kilgo, 2018). Campus-based activities that increase awareness of and engagement with trans individuals and communities can decrease anxiety and increase comfort with self and others in some trans individuals (Testa et al., 2014). We discuss campus gender climate in more detail in chapter 6.

Family Income Differences Among College Students

Even as the United States becomes more stratified by socioeconomic status (SES) and income, higher education becomes more diverse. More students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are enrolling in all sectors of higher education, but particularly at 2-year institutions and private, for-profit institutions, than in previous years (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Using data from the U.S. Department of Education, Chen and Nunnery (2019) found that 31% of undergraduates in the 2015–2016 academic year were from families with incomes below the poverty line, compared to 16% of students in the 1999–2000 academic year and 19% during the 2007–2008 academic year. At the same time an estimated 42% of students who were determined to be independent for financial aid purposes were living below the poverty line. Students who identify as women, African American, Latinx, Asian and Asian American, American Indian, first- and second-generation immigrants, and students who speak a language other than English in the home were overrepresented among students below the poverty line.

Financial aid appears to have opened higher education to more students from lower SES backgrounds, as students who are from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to apply for and receive financial aid to attend college (Chen & Nunnery, 2019). Students from lower SES backgrounds still face obstacles to success in higher education, however (Kezar, 2011; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, et al., 2016), including the need to work more hours per week for pay than their higher-SES peers (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, et al., 2016) as well as the possibility of food and housing insecurity (Hallett et al., 2019), even with federal financial aid. It is important to note, too, that international students, undocumented students, and students

under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) do not qualify for federal financial aid and many forms of institutional aid and may be more susceptible to food and housing insecurity.

Adult Students

There is little agreement in higher education research about how to define “adult students.” Enrollment trends indicate that the assumption of an 18- to 22-year-old college student is anachronistic (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996); definitional ambiguity means that a clear picture of enrollment trends for adult learners is difficult to find. Donaldson and Townsend (2007), for example, presented widely varying enrollment figures depending on whether “adult” is defined as “older than 24” or “older than 25.” Further, higher education researchers have paid little attention to the experiences of adult learners in higher education, as is the case with many nonmajority populations (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Mayhew, Rockenbach, & Bowman, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The National Center for Education Statistics uses a conservative definition of adult learners—students 25 years of age or older. Using this definition, adult learners totaled approximately seven million students in 2007 (Hussar & Bailey, 2009); by 2016 the number of adult learners had increased to approximately eight million students (Snyder et al., 2019). Adult students are much more likely to be part-time students; approximately five million of the eight million adult learners are part-time students.

Adult learners are often included in discussions of other “nontraditional students,” including students who are financially independent, are parents themselves, or are married. Unfortunately, these other nontraditional characteristics are often used as euphemism for “at-risk” categories (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996) who are often not well served by postsecondary institutions. Given the increasing number of adult learners enrolling in higher education, especially with increases in numbers of returning veteran students, discussed in the next subsection, higher education must find ways to address the needs of this population and decrease the risk that they will leave college before achieving their goals.

Returning Veteran Students

The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill) was one of the most influential pieces of higher education legislation of its time. Bennett (1966) reported, for example, that by 1946—only 2 years after the implementation of the GI Bill—over 70% of all male college students were veterans, taking advantage of the benefits of the bill. With the number of college-age men and women currently serving the military, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008—the Post-9/11 GI Bill—promises to have a similarly powerful influence. The

Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Campus Campaign, which allows institutions of higher education to waive up to half the cost of attending that is not covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, provide powerful incentives for veterans returning from service to enroll in higher education.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was intended to make postsecondary education more accessible to returning veterans and increase the number of veteran students in higher education (Walton Radford, 2009), but the population of returning veteran students has increased only marginally as a result of the bill (Walton Radford, 2011). In a recent review of data from the National Postsecondary Study Aid study, Holian and Adam (2020) estimated that military students made up 6.1% of the overall undergraduate population, which translated into approximately 1.2 million students in 2015–2016. Approximately 870,500 of the 1.2 million students would be considered veteran students, with the remainder of those students as active duty or reserve soldiers. Over 43% of these students, approximately 513,000, received veterans' education benefits from the U.S. government. Students receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits can include an active service person, a veteran, and their dependents (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). Military students are typically known to the institution because they are receiving these benefits; otherwise, their affiliation may not be known to the campus. Therefore, particular caution should be considered when examining data regarding this population, as estimates based on Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits may underestimate the number of military students in higher education (Bondi et al., 2020).

Beyond financial assistance, returning veteran students will require support in multiple forms as they transition into higher education (Bondi et al., 2020; Cook & Young, 2009). Specifically, literature reviewed on this population by Barry et al. (2014) focuses on military students' "mental health, coping strategies, PTSD and relationship to combat experience, time away from school, importance of support from military peers, military pride, and stereotypes" (Bondi et al., 2020, pp. 344–345). As stated previously, sudden disruptions in enrollment will require colleges and universities to negotiate ways to support the successful return of current students, with minimal disruption to their academic progress, at the same time as they prepare for an influx of new students who are returning veterans. Returning veterans often perceive higher education environments as hostile and antimilitary (DiRamio et al., 2008). Further, returning veterans, particularly those who have seen combat and those who are closer to traditional college age, are at higher risk for stress-related illnesses (Seal et al., 2007). Similarly, returning veteran students are faced with role incongruities as they renegotiate a student identity while often maintaining a soldier identity (which can be a more acute issue if the student is in the National Guard or Reserves and faces the possibility of redeployment) (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Bondi et al. (2020) also report on ways military-connected students compare with nonmilitary peers: While this population generally has more responsibilities outside of classes (e.g., dependent care, working hours), they are more likely to spend time preparing to be successful academically than focusing on social connections and engagements in college.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students are difficult to define and difficult to count, but they remain a large and important segment of the undergraduate college student population in the United States (Davis, 2010). There is little clear consensus on what proportion of college students constitutes first-generation students, although many researchers point to a National Center for Education Statistics report (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) finding that 43.4% of first-year students in 1998 held first-generation status. Davis, in his book on first-generation college students, suggested the 43.4% estimation might actually be low.

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), a national student affairs professional organization, in collaboration with the Suder Foundation, recently initiated the Center for First-Generation Student Success. According to recent research sponsored by this center, approximately 24% of undergraduate students had parents with no postsecondary education, while 56% of undergraduate students had parents without a bachelor's degree, both common ways to define first generation (RTI International, 2019). Looking specifically at the 56% of undergraduates who had parents without bachelor's degrees (the center's definition of first-generation status), researchers found that first-generation students were less likely to attend college full time and more likely to have dependents, be a veteran, and identify as female than non-first-generation students. Further, Black and Latinx students were more likely to be overrepresented in the first-generation group, whereas White and Asian American students were underrepresented. Finally, first-generation students were more likely to come from families with lower annual parental income than were non-first-generation students: \$41,000 average annual income compared to \$90,000 average annual income, respectively.

Students With Disabilities and Mental Health Concerns

There is a widely held belief that the proportion of students with disabilities and mental health issues on college campuses is growing. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and increased sensitivity to issues of access have certainly made college attendance a greater possibility for more students who identify as having a disability, although the reality of greater proportions of students with disabilities attending college varies by type of disability. Evans and DeVita (2017) found that, much like many of the groups discussed in this chapter, students with disabilities represent a heterogeneous group. Not only do students with disabilities identify within each of the racial, ethnic, sexuality, and socioeconomic groups discussed earlier, but also the differences in disabilities experienced by these students add to the diversity in this student group. Students with physical disabilities (for example, mobility impairments) are likely to be the most recognizable for student affairs and higher education professionals, but students with less visible or invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities and mental health issues, make up this group as well.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (Snyder & Dillow, 2011), 11% of undergraduates in 2007 reported having a disability. This number was the same as the percentage of students reporting similar disabilities in 2003, indicating that this population of students is growing at a rate similar to the rate of total undergraduate population growth. The Department of Education's definition is, however, limited to students who report learning disabilities, one of several physical disabilities (such as deafness or mobility impairments), or both. Looking deeper into these statistics reveals that certain groups of students are more likely to report having a disability than other groups of students. Specifically, White students, older students, and veteran students are overrepresented among students with disabilities compared to their representation in the overall undergraduate student population.

Although the Department of Education report (Snyder & Dillow, 2011) provided an overview of students with disabilities on college campuses, the narrow definition excludes an important category of students: students with mental health concerns. It is not uncommon to hear higher education professionals discussing the perceived increase in the number of students with mental health issues on college campuses, often using an increased use of college counseling services as evidence for such an assertion. Longitudinal data is beginning to provide an understanding that supports this claim. In 2008, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH, 2012, 2020) was established to begin tracking the use of and outcomes associated with college counseling centers, collecting standardized data annually from approximately 140 college counseling centers. Although the data collected by CCMH is not intended to make generalizations about all college students, or even college students seeking mental health services on campus, CCMH annual reports provide a snapshot of and trends related to mental health issues on college campuses.

According to the latest CCMH (2020) annual report, among students seeking mental health services on campus, the proportion reporting self-harm and suicidal ideation has increased over each of the last 9 years. In 2019, approximately 29% of clients reported nonsuicidal self-injury, and 11% reported previous suicide attempts. Similarly, students' self-reported anxiety, depression, and academic distress were at all-time high in 2019. It does appear, however, that students are seeking mental health counseling more regularly and prior to starting higher education: 56% of students seeking mental health counseling on college campuses reported receiving prior counseling. In the baseline year of 2008, 19% of students seeking mental health counseling at a campus facility had received counseling prior to enrolling in college (CCMH, 2012). Early evidence (e.g., Wang et al., 2020) from the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that college students experienced increased depression and anxiety; it is not clear what effects the pandemic will have on college student mental health long term.

Although research related to the "increasing" numbers of students with disabilities is not available, readily accessible demographic data demonstrate that higher education professionals must be sensitive to and understand the issues of this diverse group of students. Partially in response to this need, helping skills have been identified as an essential competency of student affairs professionals (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015; Reynolds, 2009).

Attitudes and Beliefs of Current College Students

The previous section focused on sociodemographic characteristics of college students. We turn now to the attitudes and values of today's college students. Obviously, students do not enter college as "blank slates"; they come with attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and motivations that influence how they experience college. Much is made of how each generation of college students is different from any that has come before it. Students entering college directly from high school are no longer defined as the sheltered, conventional, team-oriented, and achievement-oriented "millennial generation" (see Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003) that grew up in post-9/11 war and economic recessions. They are instead the racially and ethnically diverse "Gen Z" young adults born after 1996 as "digital natives" who became accustomed to reports of school shootings and climate-driven disasters such as forest fires, hurricanes, and floods. They expected to inherit a strong economy with record-low unemployment, until the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented societal upheaval, job loss, and economic uncertainty. A Pew Research Center study (Parker & Igielink, 2020) found that Gen Z shares a number of political values with the Millennials, including views of climate change and racism in the United States. Gen Z members tend to hold more inclusive views of LGBT people than previous generations, and see both family and societal change as good.

Perhaps the most comprehensive longitudinal database of trends in students' attitudes and beliefs is housed at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute: the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). Since 1966, UCLA researchers have administered the CIRP instruments to incoming first-year students on thousands of college and university campuses (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). The CIRP freshman survey gathers data on students' characteristics, attitudes, values, and behaviors. The consistent, longitudinal approach to this data collection allows for a comprehensive understanding of trends over time. This section highlights some of those findings and explores more deeply the trends identified by the UCLA researchers.

Religion and Spirituality

Even a cursory review of published literature in higher education reveals increasing attention being paid to students' spirituality and spiritual development, outcomes of college that many researchers believe have been neglected (see, for example, Astin et al., 2011). The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), begun in 2009 and led by Alyssa Rockenbach and Mathew Mayhew (Interfaith Youth Core, n.d.), has focused even greater attention on issues of religious and spiritual development. In 2011, the IDEALS project team launched the College Religious and Spirituality Climate Survey (CRSC) and more recently the Values, Interfaith Engagement, and Worldview Survey (VIEWS).

Descriptive data published by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute demonstrates that college students began refocusing on issues of spirituality at the start of the 21st century (Pryor et al., 2007). Although some of the research on students'

spiritual development was completed prior to 9/11 (Jablonski, 2001), researchers point to the existential crises arising out of the terrorist attacks as well as general characteristics of millennial generation college students as precipitators of a renewed emphasis on spirituality (Braskamp, 2007; Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2011).

Higher education scholars draw important distinctions between spirituality and religion that members of the general public, who may use these terms interchangeably, may not recognize. Astin et al. (2011) summarized the scholarly difference between these two concepts. Religion, according to these authors, involves “adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity” (p. 5) believed to have created the world. Religion involves membership in a like-minded community, drawn together by shared doctrinal beliefs. Spirituality, by contrast, is not bound by adherence to doctrine and is conceived of, in the higher education literature, as bigger than religion. Spirituality is the term often used to refer to students’ search for meaning in life (Braskamp, 2007). According to Astin et al. (2011), spirituality involves “the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here” (p. 4). Similarly, Nash and Murray (2010) characterized spirituality as the search for purpose in life and have, along with Dalton (2001), linked the search for spiritual purpose to the search for vocational purpose and an avocation among college students.

In 2003 researchers at UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute implemented a 7-year study of how the college experience affects students’ spiritual development. The findings, reported in a 2011 book by Astin et al., indicated that engagement with religious institutions and practices among college students had decreased, whereas a search for spiritual meaning had increased. Of particular note, Astin et al. found that students’ inclination to engage in a spiritual quest, defined as actively searching for meaning and purpose in life, grows significantly during the college years.

The findings of UCLA’s Spirituality in Higher Education study are supported by trends documented by UCLA’s CIRP project (Pryor et al., 2007). In reviewing data from a 40-year period, Pryor et al. (2007) noted that the high mark for religion and spirituality among college students was the late 1960s, when the first-year student survey began. Over 80% of all entering first-year college students between 1967 and 1970 reported that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was an essential or very important outcome of colleges. Slightly less than half (46%) of the entering cohort of first-year students in 2005 indicated that developing a meaningful philosophy was an essential or very important objective of higher education (Pryor et al., 2007), which is approximately the same percent of respondents to the 2018 survey (46.5%; Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Although much lower than the reported levels in the late 1960s, 46% is higher than responses to the same item during the 1970s and 1980s, indicating a sustained emphasis on spiritual development among college students over the last 2 decades.

Mayhew, Rockenbach, Correia, et al. (2016) in a report from the IDEALS project found that the vast majority of students identified as some combination of

spiritual or religious. Specifically, 41% of student respondents identified as “both religious and spiritual,” 26% as “spiritual, but not religious,” and 11% as “religious, but not spiritual” (Mayhew, Rockenbach, & Correia, et al., 2016, p. 5). Only 22% of students indicated neither a religious nor spiritual identity. Almost half of respondents also indicated that their religious beliefs and faith were major influences on their worldview, while 85% believed that it was important for college campuses to provide welcoming environments for students from a wide range of religious traditions.

Students are reporting a desire for engagement across religious or spiritual differences, but their reported actions do not align with their purported desire. More than 8 in 10 students believe that “we can overcome many of the world’s major problems if people of different religious and nonreligious perspectives work together” and that “cultivating interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place” (Mayhew, Rockenbach, & Correia, et al., 2016, p. 7), but students are more likely to stay in religiously like-minded groups. Stolzenberg et al. (2019) found that approximately 68% of first-year students reported frequently or occasionally attending a religious service during 2018. Mayhew, Rockenbach, and Correia, et al. (2016) found this percent was closer 30 when students were asked if they had attended even one religious service of a faith other than their own. Given the emerging research on the relationship between a religion, spirituality, worldview diversity, and political beliefs (Morin et al., 2018), finding ways for students to interact across religious and spiritual differences is an important task for colleges.

Empirical research related to college students’ search for spiritual meaning and religious participation is, at best, mixed and is certainly related to contemporary events. General trends indicate a decreased emphasis on religious engagement, with a concomitant overall increase in spirituality. This general trend is supported by much of the contemporary research on students’ spirituality (Astin et al., 2011; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, et al., 2016; Nash & Murray, 2010). It is also tempered by findings that the decrease in religious involvement seen during college (Hill, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) might be short-lived. Certainly, the importance of spirituality, whether coupled with religious practices or not, during the lives of traditional-age college students is supported by student development theories that suggest a search for meaning occurs naturally (Parks, 2011; Patton et al., 2016). Spirituality and religion are likely to remain important topics for college students and those of us who study them for some time to come.

Political Attitudes

College students in 1990 complained, “Our generation hasn’t had any defining moment to really galvanize us” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 138). Levine and Cureton (1998) painted a picture of college students in the 1990s who focused their political activism on local campus issues related to financing higher education, multiculturalism and diversity education, and administrative policies that directly affected their lives. The two generations following these Gen Xers cannot say the same after 9/11, the Great Recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, and

pandemics of racism and gun violence in the United States. Although the data from the CIRP freshman study (Stolzenberg et al., 2019) cannot draw causal inferences between these defining moments and current political attitudes and values, these data provide a description of those attitudes and values and how they have changed over time.

In 2007, Pryor et al. concluded that the college students of the time were more politically polarized than any previous time, with increasing percentages of incoming first-year students indicating that they are either “conservative/far right” or “liberal/far left” rather than “middle of the road” (p. 28) politically. More recent data (Stolzenberg et al., 2019) suggest that only a very small percent of first-year students consider themselves far left or far right (3.6% and 2.0%, respectively). The plurality of first-year students (43.8%) self-report as “middle of the road” politically.

With 30.5% self-reporting as “liberal” and 20% as “conservative,” the current generation hardly presents as politically polarized. Some level of consensus about even the most contentious political issues appears to be emerging. Among first-year students in 2018, for example, 68% indicated that they strongly agree or somewhat agree that “abortion should be legal.” Similarly, 66% strongly or somewhat agreed that marijuana should be legal.

Attitudes Toward and Experiences With Civic Engagement

Community service and service learning are well established pedagogical tools for educators hoping to instill civic and democratic values (Colby et al., 2003; Kuh, 2008). Data suggest that current students both value community engagement and actively participate in their communities, but this may not translate into the instillation of civic values. Over the last 3 decades the percentage of first-year students indicating that there was a very good chance they would engage in volunteer work during college increased from 17% to almost 87% (Pryor et al., 2009; Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Interestingly, even though 87% indicated that they would likely participate in volunteer work, only 36% of first-year students indicated it was an essential or very important objective of their higher education to participate in a community action program or to become involved in programs to clean up the environment. Even fewer (26.5%) indicated the influencing the political structure was an essential or very important objective.

Attitudes Toward and Experiences With Diversity

In general, contemporary college students are more likely than previous students to believe that racial discrimination is a major problem in the United States. Compared to the early 2000s, when about 20% of incoming students believed that racial discrimination was no longer a problem (Pryor et al., 2007), only 17.6% of students indicated that racial discrimination was no longer a major problem in 2018 (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). In a related trend, more students indicate that helping to promote racial understanding is an essential or very important goal of a college education. In 2006, for example, only 34% of students reported that promoting racial understanding was an essential or important goal; in 2018 almost 49% of respondents reported

that promoting racial understanding was an essential or important goal of college. Although we cannot draw any causal connections between data points, attitudes and beliefs about race and racism may be related to the amount of familiarity across racial difference. In 2018, over 96% of first-year respondents indicated that they frequently or occasionally socialized with people from other racial or ethnic groups (Stolzenberg et al.).

Conclusion

Students enrolled in colleges and universities are right now “on track to be the most diverse, best-educated generation yet,” according to research by the Pew Research Center (Fry & Parker, 2018, p. 1). Enrollment trends suggest that students are diverse in manifold sociodemographic categories, including sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and SES. Students also bring with them experiences, attitudes, and beliefs that further complicate the landscape of higher education. Further, the political polarization and subsequent discord of the larger society is evident on U.S. campuses.

We leave this chapter with a reminder of the caution with which we began: Treating a student as a product of a single identity group, without a complex understanding of how multiple identity groups intersect and individual differences manifest themselves to influence students’ experiences, is dangerous and ill-advised. This caveat does not mean that the information reported in this chapter, separated as it was for ease of reading and comprehension, is not useful to higher education professionals. As we continue through this text, exploring how the student “inputs” presented in this chapter affect the “experiences” and ultimately the “outcomes” of college, readers will begin to see how understanding the sociodemographic characteristics and attitudes and beliefs of college students can inform policies and practices.

Discussion Points

Implications for Students

- What are the implications of changing demographics for students’ experiences and learning during college?
- How does the location of a higher education institution affect the relationship between changing demographic characteristics and student experiences?
- How do escalating real-world issues influence students’ experiences and learning during college, particularly considering students’ intersecting characteristics?

Implications for Institutions

- How do institutions meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body? What are the possible financial implications of providing the necessary support services?

- What role should institutions of higher education have in influencing the sociopolitical attitudes of college students?
- What role should institutions of higher education have in responding to students' differing yet active sociopolitical attitudes on campus?
- How should institutions balance individual and community needs with respect to diversity and creating safe, inclusive learning environments? How does the type of institution (e.g., private or public, small or large) affect your response?

Implications for Policy

- What are the policy implications (positive and negative) of allowing students to self-identify and check all boxes that apply on survey items related to race and ethnicity?
- What is the role of federal and state governments in supporting the educational pursuits of returning veteran students?
- Is it appropriate to ask students to report sexual and gender identity on federal forms or on institutional application materials? What are the possible implications of doing so?

Learning Activity

Identify an institution you would like to explore; it can be one you attended, your current institution, or one at which you hope to work someday. Review the data concerning student characteristics available on the institutional website. Think about how the institution displays this information and what questions are left unanswered by these available data. Using the information available in this chapter and data from other websites, determine how well the institution's student population represents the general population of the region in regard to demographic characteristics important to you. What, if anything, might you change about the student characteristics data the institution is collecting and sharing? Whose identities are included? Whose identities are omitted?

Resources on Student Demographics

- **National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)**
Specific reports and projects of the National Center for Education Statistics include the following:
 - Digest of Education Statistics 2018 (<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/>)
 - Projection of Education Statistics to 2027 (<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019001.pdf>)
 - Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>)

- **UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (<http://heri.ucla.edu/>)**
Specific reports and projects of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute include the following:
 - The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2018 (<https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2018.pdf>)
 - The American Freshman: Fifty-Year Trends 1866–2015 (<https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/50YearTrendsMonograph2016.pdf>)
- **Center for First-Generation Student Success (<http://firstgen.naspa.org/>)**
The NASPA Center for First-Generation Student Success website provides research and policy briefs as well a newsletter and blog on issues directly related to first-generation college students and their success.
- **Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) (<https://www.ifyc.org/ideals>)**
IDEALS is a research project that seeks to understand undergraduate encounters with religious and worldview diversity on a national scale. The website provides access to multiple research reports from survey.
- **Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (<http://www.psri.hs.iastate.edu/publications.php>)**
The Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) is a national survey that assesses institutional climates that promote five dimensions of personal and social responsibility. The website provides multiple publications and presentations that explore civic learning and engagement on college campuses.
- **Pew Hispanic Center (www.pewhispanic.org)**
The Pew Hispanic Center (<http://pewhispanic.org>) is a project of the Pew Research Center (<http://pewresearch.org>). According to its website the Pew Hispanic Center is designed “to improve understanding of the U.S. Hispanic population and to chronicle Latinos’ growing impact on the nation. The Center conducts social science research, including economic, demographic and public opinion studies.” Much of the research presented by the Center focuses on college-going trends within the Hispanic population.