

Access and Choice

INTRODUCTION

The pending reauthorization of the higher education act is bringing attention back to the perennial issue of student access and choice. The debate has become more complicated with the introduction of the concepts of affordability and persistence. How these four issues are addressed will continue to shape the future of higher education.

Access has four components, geographic access, legal access, academic access, and financial access. Providing geographic access was addressed in the 1960's when hundreds of new colleges were built to educate the baby-boom generation. We have been addressing the other three for a number of years. The civil rights gains in the same era put an end to legal barriers to education posed by segregation, although attacks on affirmative action may raise new barriers. The nation continues to struggle with academic and financial access.

ACADEMIC ACCESS

By some measures, academic preparation has been improving. The high school dropout rate has declined from 14.6

percent to 12.6 percent over the last 20 years. Student achievement has been improving in a number of areas, but significant gaps in performance continue to exist between racial/ethnic groups.¹

Tom Mortenson tells a different story.² Using Census data, he shows a decline in the percent of 19 year-olds in college from a high of 40 percent in 1994 to 37.5 percent in 2000. He documents a declining high school graduation rate since

1983 and declining college continuation rates since 1996. This result includes only regular diplomas and excludes GEDs and other indicators of completion, which were included in the NCES results. By this measure, the country is falling behind in sending high school graduates on to college.

FINANCIAL ACCESS

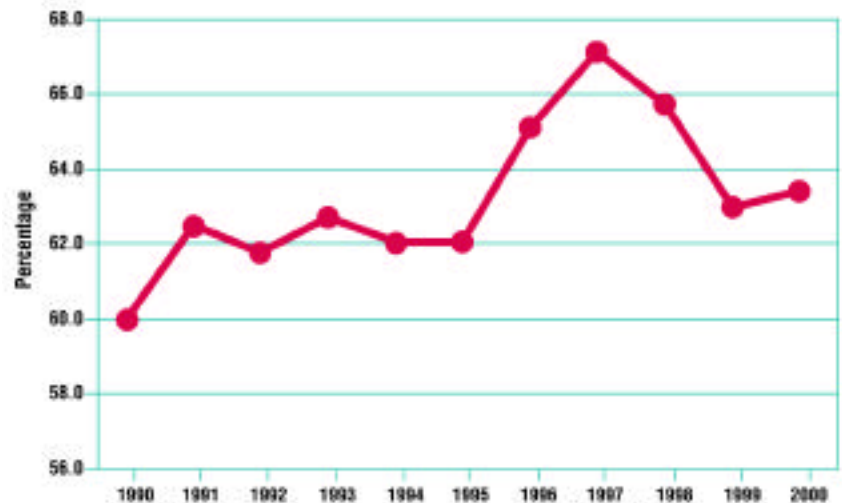
Student aid programs have grown sharply over the last 37 years since the passage of the

¹ NCES, Digest of Education Statistics:2000, OERI, Washington, DC.

² Postsecondary Education Opportunity, Chance for College by Age 19 by State in 2000, September 2000.

Chart 1

Percentage of high school graduates attending college 1990-2000



Source: NCES



Landmark Higher Education Act of 1965. A good deal of the most recent growth has been in aid that is not targeted to lower income students. Merit aid, tax credits and unsubsidized loans all go to middle-income students. The issue of affordability has taken precedence over access for low-income students over the last decade.

The lowest-income students still face large financial barriers. In *Empty Promises*, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance³ documents the fact that a low-income student entering college would be over \$5,000 short if he attended a public four-year college or university. That is after all income from work, parental help, and student aid is taken into consideration.

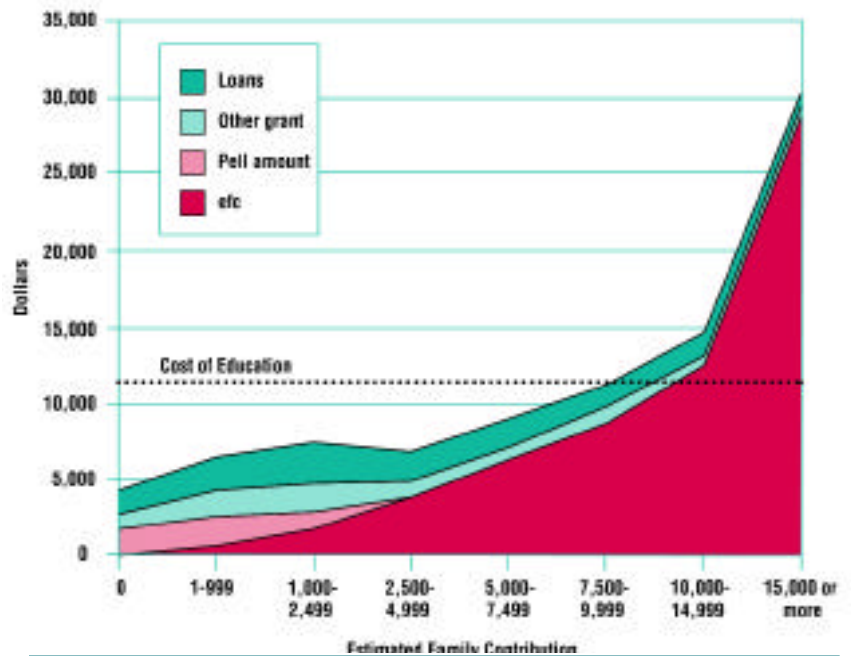
AFFORDABILITY

The increasing tuition in higher education has neutralized most of the increases in student aid. We have only stayed even with the rising tide of costs over the last decade. Tuition increases reflect several trends. States are hard pressed to maintain support for higher education, especially in periods of economic decline. Tuition is raised to make-up the shortfall. Private colleges and universities spend to improve their competitiveness in attracting better students. Improved facilities, better support

³ Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, *Empty Promises, the Myth of College Access in America*, Washington, D.C. June 2002

Chart 2

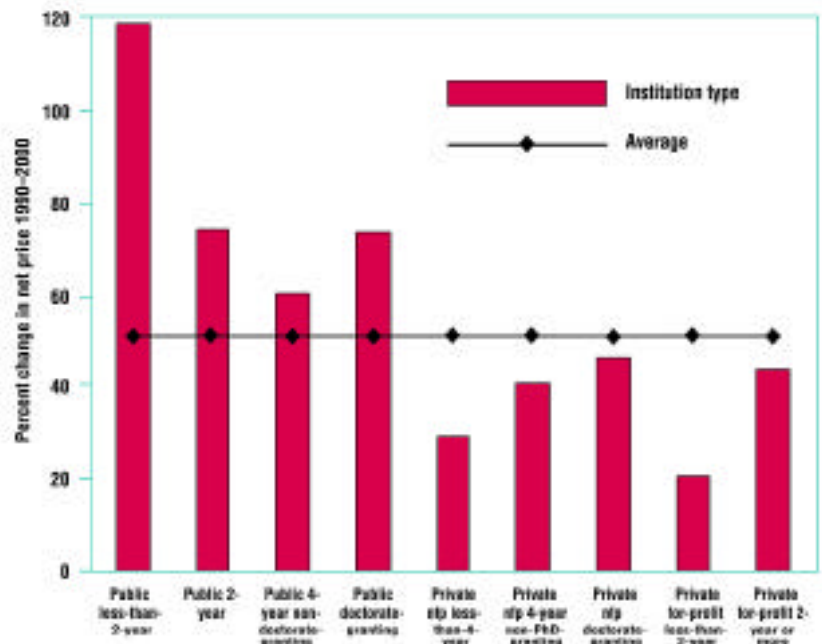
Unmet need by income, attending college costing between \$10,700 - \$11,700 2000-2001



Source: NCES, NPSAS

Chart 3

Change in net price over the decade



Source: NCES, NPSAS

services, upgraded technology and other attributes are provided to improve the attractiveness of the college. All these improvements result in higher costs, which are passed on to the student.

These tuition increases pinch middle-class families, who turn to loans and tax credits to reduce the immediate pain. This turns into political pressure to increase aid to middle-income students.

Chart 3 shows the change in net price of college over the decade. Prices have increased more for students in public in-

stitutions than in private institutions. Net price is tuition minus grant aid.

CHOICE

Many of the same issues that influence student access come into play in institutional choice. Choice generally applies to the option of attending a college that is appropriate to the student's interest and skills, not just the least expensive college available. Originally, loans were justified as providing the option for students to attend more expensive colleges than they could otherwise afford. Student success is related to

being a resident student at a four year college.

PERSISTENCE

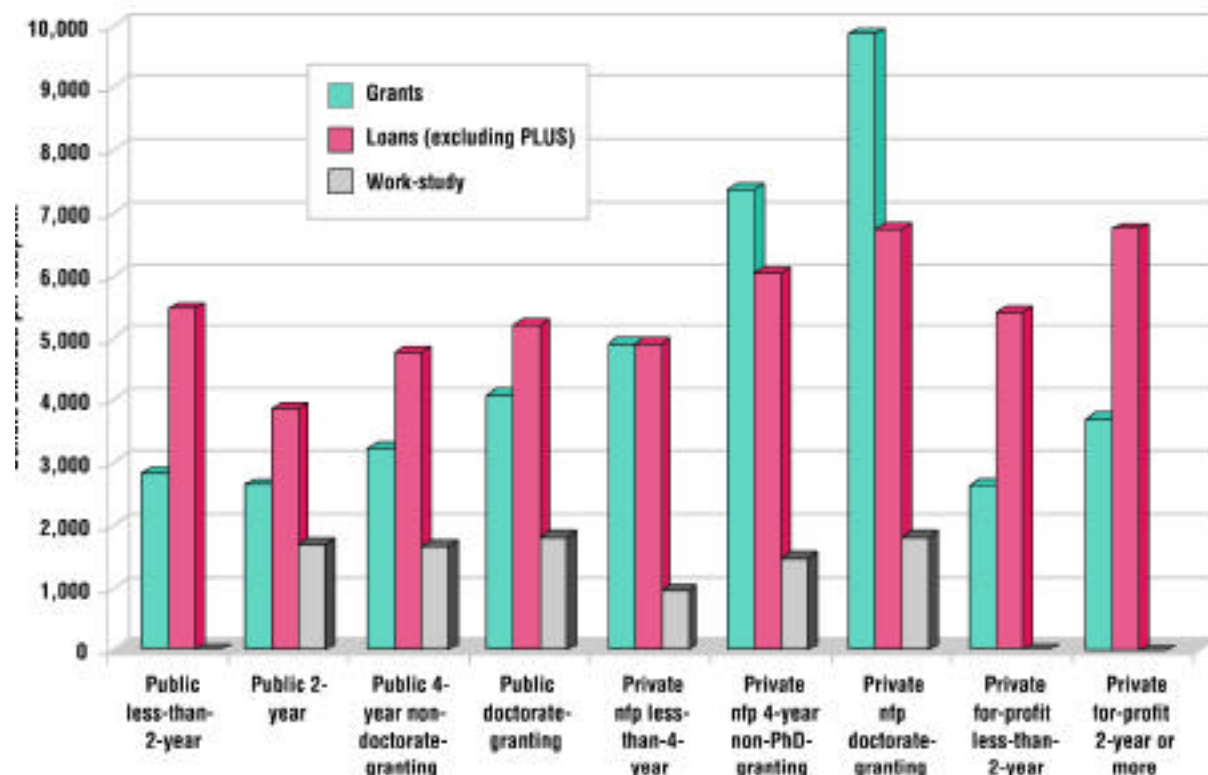
Access is only half the issue. The other half is graduation. Simply admitting a person into college does not guarantee success. A low-income student who bypasses a job to attend college and takes a loan to do so may drop-out before graduation and be worse off financially than he would have been had he never attended college.

Congress and the administration seem to be considering tying graduation rates to



Chart 4

Distribution of aid by institutional type and control



Source: NCES, NPSAS



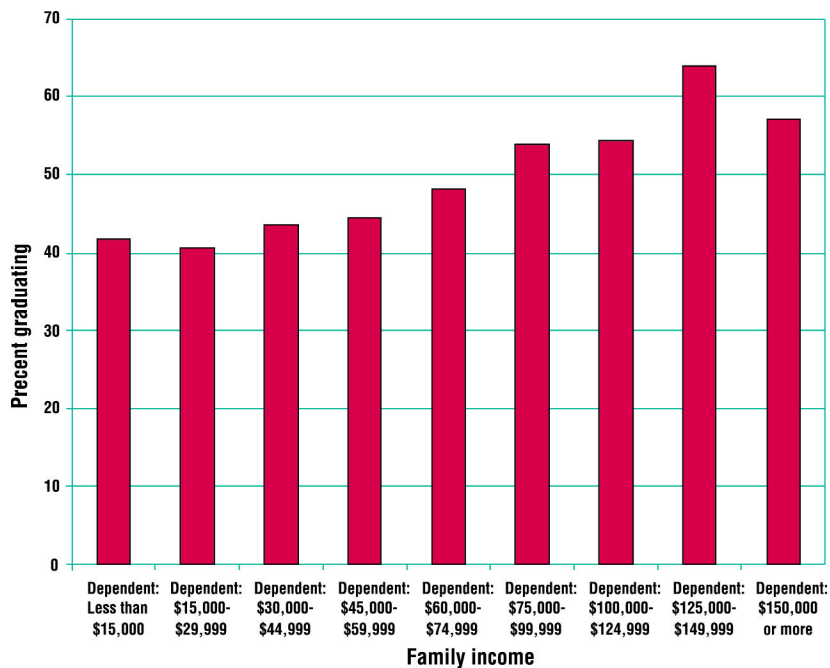
student aid funding for a college. This prospect is most disturbing to colleges that serve a large percentage of students with marginal academic preparation and high financial need. High income students are more likely to graduate from college than are those with lower incomes.

CONCLUSION

Access to college is a measure of equity and opportunity for low-income and minority populations. Attending college is a barometer of future achievement. We have come a long way in providing access, but have hit a plateau. Improvements are harder to come by and require additional resource investment to ensure both access and success.

Chart 5

Graduation rates by Income



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