

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

REVERSING ENROLLMENT DECLINES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

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PROBLEM

Despite rising high-school graduation rates contributing to a larger pool of potential college students and a growing demand for a college-educated workforce, Massachusetts is faced with a decline in college enrollment driven by the enduring crisis of college affordability. A decade ago, despite emerging skepticism due to high costs, Americans still overwhelmingly viewed higher education as a good investment and beneficial for the country, with parents across political lines expecting their children to attend college. However, a decade later, rising costs and student debt have significantly reduced both the perceived and actual value of a college education, leading to declining confidence in higher education as a pathway to financial security.

OPPORTUNITY

However, there is a silver lining in Massachusetts. A robust consensus has emerged among the executive branch, legislature, and administration regarding the paramount importance of access to and success in higher education. The FY24 budget saw a praiseworthy influx of funding from the new fair share amendment revenues. And, even before this allocation, the legislature and administration showcased their commitment by embarking on a rigorous, equity-focused introspection, setting the stage for a more inclusive future.

MAIN FINDINGS

Rising High School Graduation Rates: Massachusetts has seen an increase in high school graduation rates over the past decade that transcends racial and socio-economic categories. This establishes a pipeline of a larger and diverse pool of potential college students, with approximately 5,000 more graduates compared to 2012.

Decline in Immediate College Enrollment: Despite increased high school graduation rates, fewer Massachusetts high school graduates are enrolling in college immediately after high school. Enrollment dropped from 73 percent in 2015-16 to 63 percent in 2020-21, disproportionately affecting students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

Racial and Income Disparities in Enrollment: The decline in immediate enrollment is particularly pronounced among Hispanic and Black students, highlighting racial disparities exacerbated by historical disadvantages and structural racism. The gap in enrollment between low-income and affluent students has increased from 21 percent to 30 percentage points, aggravating socioeconomic inequalities.

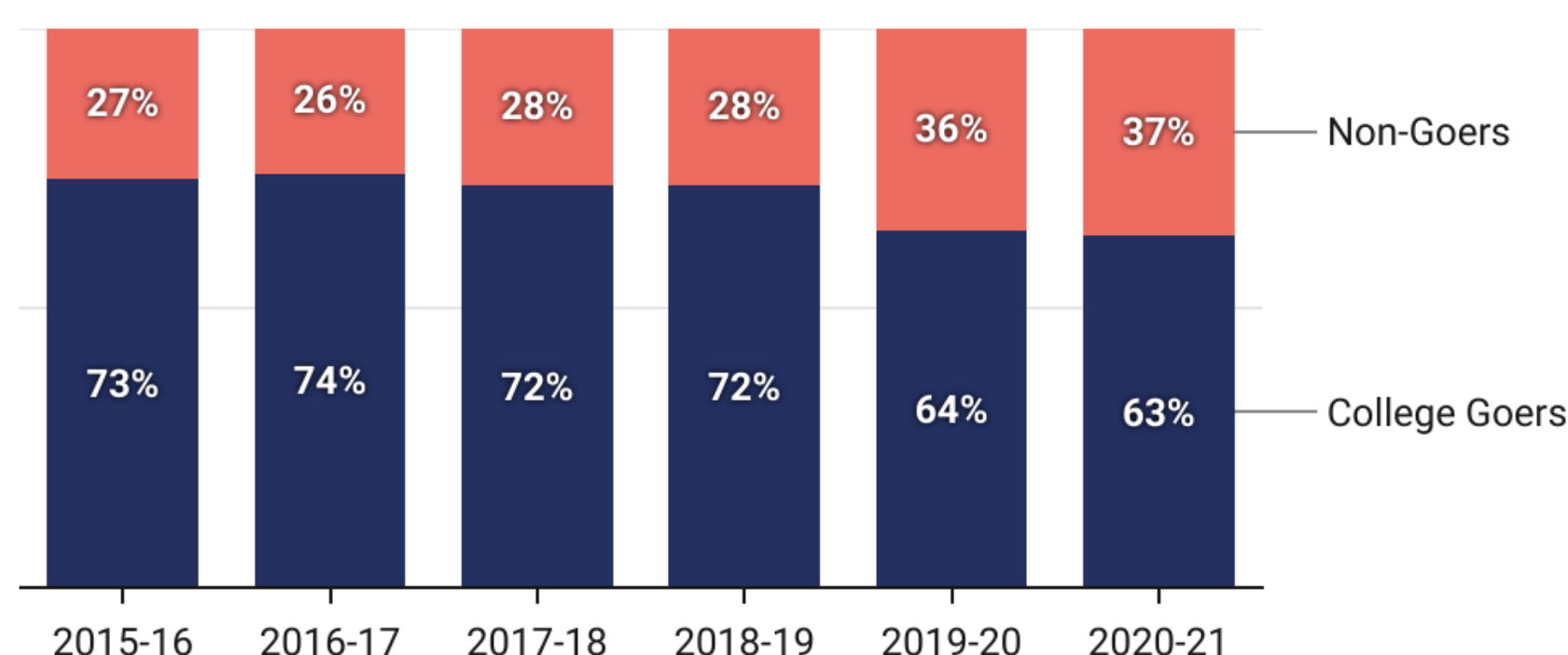
Impact on Higher Education Sectors: Enrollment at in-state colleges and universities has declined, while out-of-state institutions have remained stable. Community colleges, serving minority and low-income students, have experienced the most significant loss.

Decline in Overall College Attendance: Beyond immediate enrollment, overall college attendance has decreased at the state's community colleges and universities, particularly among minority groups. Black and Hispanic students saw steeper declines in community college and state university enrollment.

Rising Non-Completion Rates: The observed decline in student populations at community colleges and state universities extends beyond just a reduction in freshman enrollments. Our findings suggest an increasing trend of students not completing their degrees, emphasizing the pivotal role that affordability plays in this trend.

MA Grads Attending College/University

An increasing number of high school graduates forgo college/university immediately after graduating



This data tracks high school graduates who do not attend college by the March following their high school graduation year.

Chart: By the Hildreth Institute • Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • Created with Datawrapper

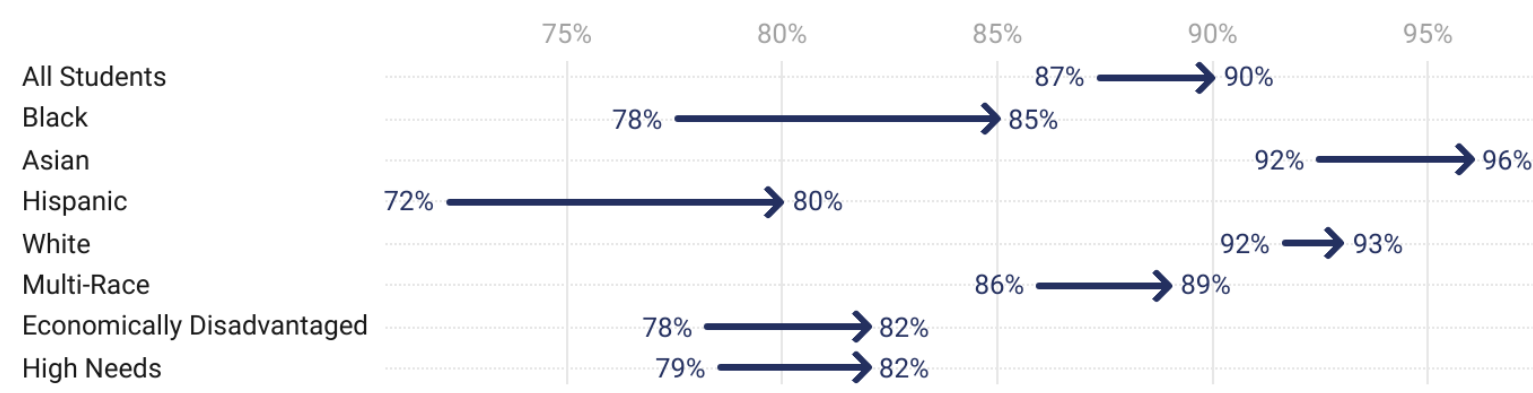


High School Graduation on the Rise

Greater diversity coupled with significant improvements in graduation rates across all cohorts, but particularly among racial and ethnic minorities and those who are economically disadvantaged, has resulted in a diverse pool of high school graduates who are potential candidates for pursuing a higher education.

Change in Massachusetts High School Graduation Rates From 2015 to 2021

Largest gains in graduation are among Hispanic/Latino and African American/Black Students



Note: Data from The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education uses the terms "African American/Black", "Hispanic/Latino", "Multi-race (Non Hispanic/Latino)" in their data labels. We have used different data labels in our charts and throughout the paper for simplicity and consistency.

Chart: Hildreth Institute • Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • Created with Datawrapper

College Enrollment on the Decline

Students who are opting out of college are primarily people of color and low-income students. The most dramatic decrease in immediate college enrollment is seen among Hispanic high school graduates, a group that already had some of the lowest enrollment rates.

Change in Massachusetts Students' Immediate College Enrollment Post-High School by Student Group From 2015 to 2021

Declines in college-enrollment right after high school across all student groups

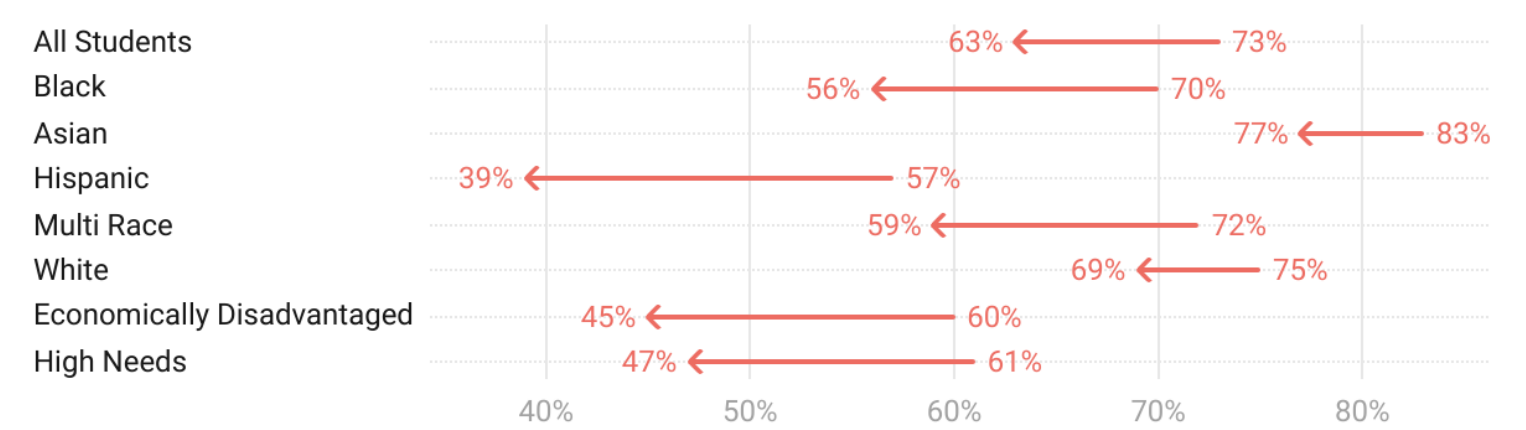


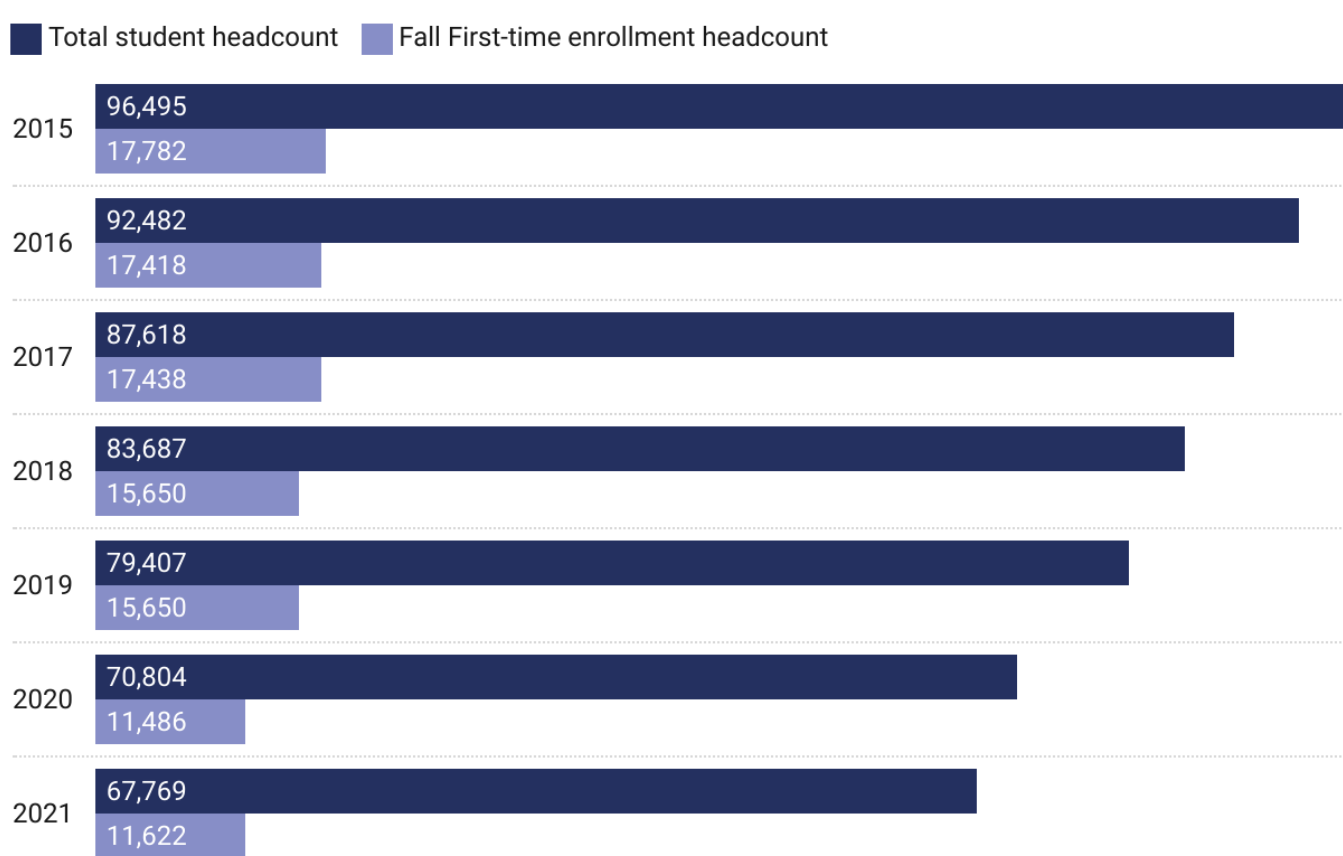
Chart: Hildreth Institute • Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • Created with Datawrapper

Rising Non-Completion Rates

An increasing number of students are discontinuing their degrees midway through their programs. Since 2015, the student population at community colleges has shrunk by 28,726. Of this decline, only about 20 percent (6,160) is due to a decrease in freshman student enrollments. This data indicates a rising trend of students leaving their degrees incomplete. A Similar trend is present at State Universities as well.

Massachusetts Community Colleges Total Headcount

An increasing number of students are discontinuing their degrees



Data shown represents student headcount, not full-time equivalency. This encompasses both students attending full-time and part-time. First-time enrollment data encompasses not only MA students enrolling immediately post-high school, but also those who enroll at any age.

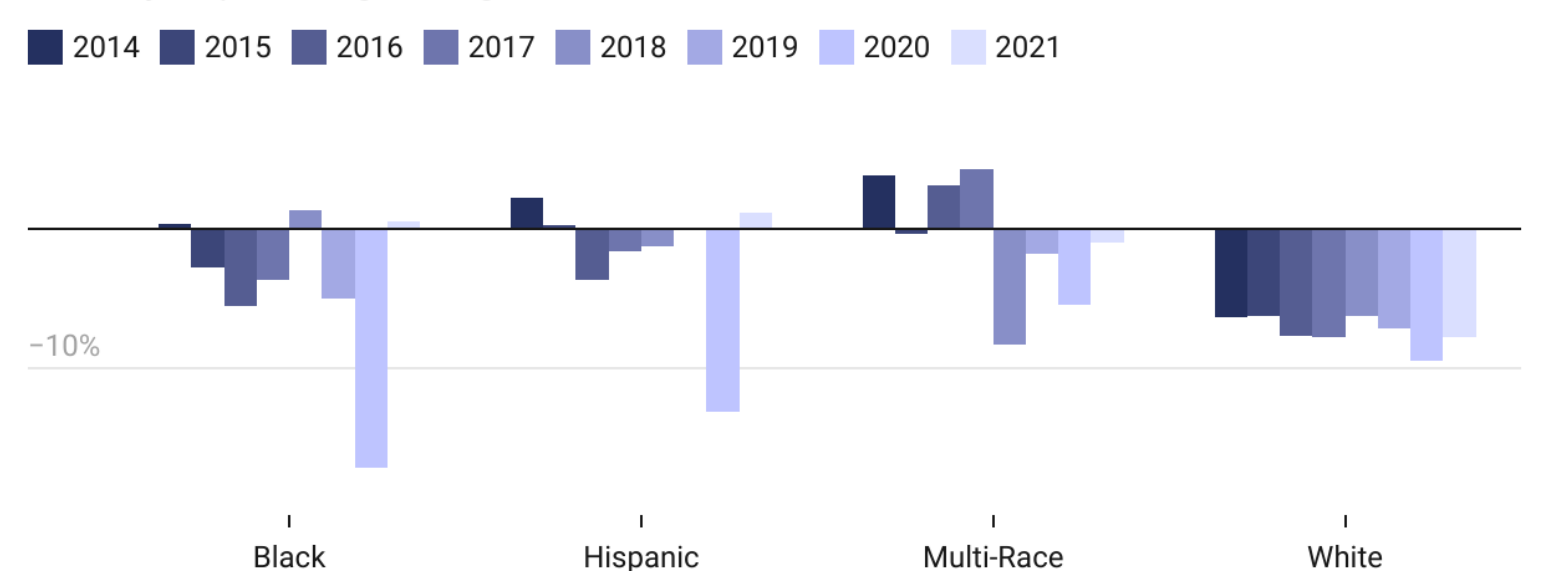
Chart: Created by Hildreth Institute using data obtained from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System • Created with Datawrapper

Attendance Declines for Racial Minorities

The period from 2013 to 2022 saw the most dramatic declines for Black and Hispanic students, a trend that is particularly pronounced at community colleges. During this timeframe, community college attendance plummeted by an alarming 31 percent for Black students and by 14 percent for Hispanic students.

MA Community College Total Enrollment Minority Headcount Fall Term

Year to year percentage change in enrollment



Note: Data from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education uses "African American," "Latino," and "Two or more Races" in their data labels. We have used different data labels throughout the paper and in our charts for simplicity and consistency.

Chart: Created by Hildreth Institute using data obtained from Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. • Created with Datawrapper



RECOMMENDATIONS



EXPAND ON THE TUITION-FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMMITMENT WITH THE GOAL OF ACHIEVING A DEBT-FREE PROGRAM

- Reevaluate the "last-dollar" grant approach, which has regressive impacts on lower-income students.
- Shift focus from covering only tuition and fees to meeting students' full "unmet financial need," which includes living expenses, textbooks, and more.
- Allocate financial aid by calculating students' unmet financial needs based on the full cost of attendance to effectively reduce or eliminate the need for student loans.



EXPAND THE DEBT-FREE COMMITMENT TO 4-YEAR PUBLIC DEGREES

- Broaden affordability measures to include 4-year institutions to prevent educational inequalities based on socio-economic and racial lines.
- Develop a comprehensive strategy that promotes equitable access across all educational levels and institutions.



PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

- Invest in well-rounded student support services such as academic advising, mental health assistance, and career guidance to aid in student retention and success.



SUPPORT EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS

- Discontinue practices like legacy admissions and early decision policies, which perpetuate socio-economic and racial disparities in college admissions.
- Engage community organizations and high schools.
- Partner with community organizations for targeted outreach to underrepresented minority and economically disadvantaged students.
- Enhance financial support for high-school counseling services to early-inform students about new affordability initiatives and promote a college-bound mindset.