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The Rise of Economic Affirmative Action:

Universities are Finding New and Better Paths to Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

Many feared that the Supreme Court's 2023 decision banning the use of race in college admissions would deal a crushing blow to campus diversity. Before oral arguments in the case, more than 30 liberal arts schools filed an amicus brief warning that without the benefit of affirmative action, Black students might fall to just 2.1% of all new undergrads at selective institutions, a return to "early 1960s levels."[1] When the ruling came down, the court's three liberal justices wrote in their dissent that it would have a "devastating impact" on minority enrollment.[2]

Thankfully, those dire predictions have yet to come true. In this report, we review data from the 2024 and 2025 admissions cycles showing that, in the wake of *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, higher education institutions have not given up on diversity. Instead, they have seemingly begun the hard work of finding new paths to it. Two main facts jump out:

1. Minority student enrollment fell less than critics of the court's ruling forecasted. Most (though not all) of the country's top colleges and universities avoided massive declines, and some saw barely any drop at all.

2. In response to the demise of traditional, race-based affirmative action, top-rated schools appear to have begun enrolling more economically disadvantaged students, opening their doors to a group of learners who add their own important dimension of diversity to campus culture. In a new analysis, we show that the share of students receiving Pell Grants, which provide aid to low- and middle-income undergrads, has increased at 15 of the 18 highly selective institutions that currently provide public, up-to-date data. In 10 cases, the share of Pell Grant-eligible students increased more than 20%.

Admitting more low-income and working-class students may have helped some schools limit declines in Black and Hispanic enrollment — though, as we discuss later in our paper, how much so is actually unclear.

Regardless, there is a fair amount of good news in these results. First, it is a relief that minority enrollment did not implode as some anticipated. Diverse campuses are good for students and good for our society. When schools bring young people from different ethnic backgrounds together, it deepens learning and increases understanding across races while reducing stereotypes. It also helps diversify America's leadership class, which tends to be drawn from the graduates of highly selective colleges.[3]

The rise in economic diversity is also very welcome, and overdue. America's top colleges have a long, unfortunate history of virtually ignoring economic class in their admissions decisions. As a result, they have fallen short in their role as ladders for social mobility and failed to build student bodies that truly reflect the wider nation.

The move toward economic affirmative action as a means to promote diversity is a step in the right political direction for higher education institutions that have lost much of the public's support in recent years. Racial preferences were always unpopular; 68% of Americans backed the Supreme Court's decision striking them down.[4] By contrast, strong majorities of Americans think it is only fair to provide a leg up in college admissions to students who have overcome economic obstacles.[5]

But the change is also a step toward greater fairness. Race used to be the primary obstacle to opportunity in America, and there was a time when the academic achievement gap between Black and white students was twice as large as the achievement gap between rich and poor. But America has changed in the intervening decades, and today the reverse is true: the achievement gap between rich and poor is roughly twice the gap between Black and white students, according to Stanford University's Sean Reardon.[6]

And the shift from race to economic need as the basis for special consideration is likely to strengthen social cohesion. While racial preferences were always a divisive and unpopular means of achieving integration, economic affirmative action can do the important work of bringing students of different backgrounds together but in a way that emphasizes a common American identity rather than reinforcing racial differences.

While the early admissions trends we document are encouraging, they cannot be an excuse for complacency. Minority enrollment need not have declined even as much as it has. Colleges could still do more to recruit more low-income and working-class students. We believe legislators and educational institutions could address both issues using the tools of economic affirmative action, even without the crutch of blunt racial preferences.

While giving an admissions edge to lower-income applicants is a good start, more universities should also offer a leg up to students from poor neighborhoods or from families with low net worths. These policies are

racially neutral and can be justified as a matter of fairness but in practice would also give a larger boost on average to underrepresented minorities, offsetting some of the declines in Black and Hispanic enrollment since *Students for Fair Admissions*. University leaders and policymakers should also take steps to end legacy admissions that give an unfair advantage to the children of wealthy alumni. Congress could prod schools into action by reducing taxes on their endowments in return for adopting these changes and dialing up the tax for bad actors. For Democratic politicians looking to revive their party's image with working-class voters, this is a straightforward opportunity to champion their interests. We've avoided a worst-case scenario for diversity on campus, and begun moving in a new, promising direction. But there's still much work to be done.

I. RACIAL DIVERSITY

When colleges welcomed their first freshmen classes admitted under the Supreme Court's new race-blind standard in the Fall of 2024, journalists focused much of their attention on institutions that saw the most dramatic declines in the share of Black students, including MIT, Johns Hopkins, Brown, Columbia, and Amherst.[7]

Yet many universities were in fact able to sustain high levels of racial diversity that year. At Harvard, the share of Black students did not decline to 2%. Instead, it fell modestly to 14%.[8] Hispanic representation actually grew two percentage points, and Asian representation held steady at 37%.[9] Princeton, Dartmouth, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia, and Emory all announced they had succeeded in keeping racial diversity at roughly the *same level* as they had achieved in the past, employing racial preferences. At Yale, Black and Hispanic representation stayed exactly even at 14% and 19%, respectively.[10] Duke actually saw an *increase* in Black enrollment, from 12% to 13%, and in Hispanic enrollment from 13% to 14%.[11] Williams, Bowdoin, Bates, and Caltech all increased Black enrollment as well.[12]

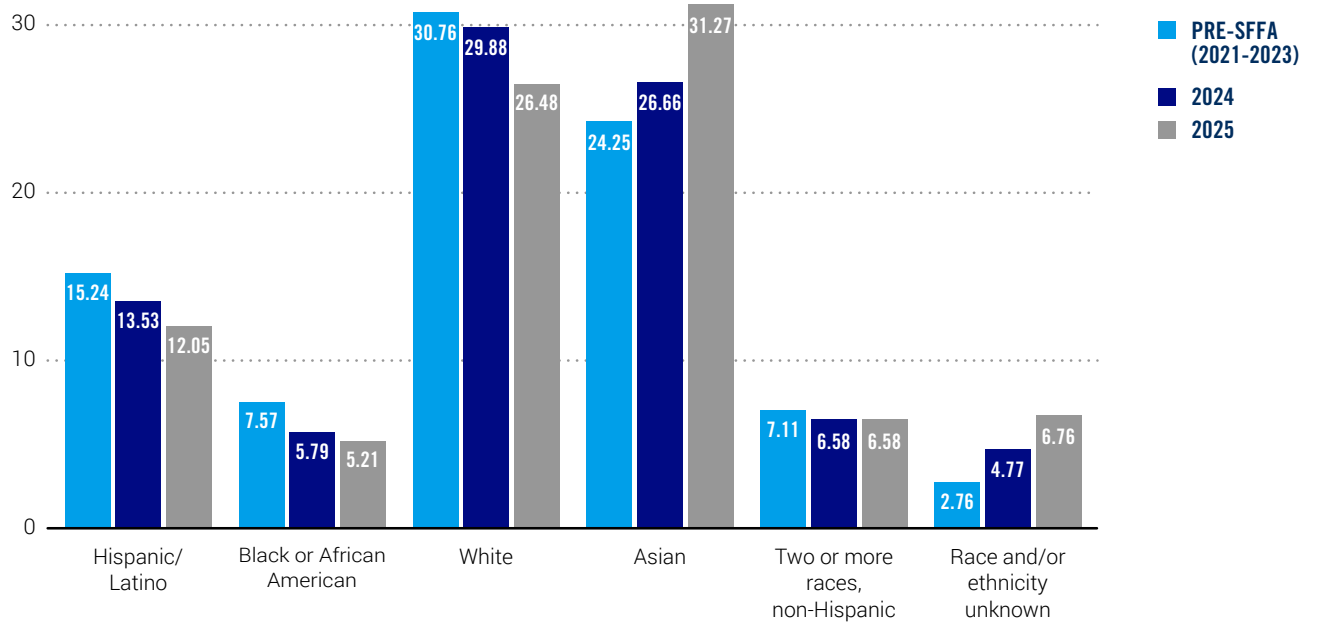
More comprehensive analyses also showed that while minority enrollment fell at some top institutions, it did not catastrophically collapse the way some had predicted. A 2025 College Board report examining 60 selective public and private colleges and universities found that Black enrollment fell by just one-tenth of a percentage point between 2023 and 2024, from 7.5% to 7.4%, and Hispanic enrollment remained unchanged at 15.6%.[13] Likewise, a 2025 analysis by the *New York Times* of 59 top colleges found that the average shares of Black and Hispanic students in entering classes each fell by a single percentage point after the court's decision.[14] A 2026 analysis by the non-profit organization, Class Action, found that Black and Hispanic enrollment in 2024 declined at the most selective colleges but increased at public flagship institutions.[15]

For the entering class of 2025, the same basic pattern appeared to hold. (Not every school has provided 2025 data.) Some institutions, such as Princeton, Caltech, and Haverford did see a troubling decline in the share of Black students compared to 2025.[16] But others, such as Yale, enrolled a strong 12% share of Black students in 2025.[17] The University of Pennsylvania actually saw the share of underrepresented minority students increase between 2024 and 2025 from 23% to 24%.[18] Amherst, MIT, and Johns Hopkins also saw a higher share of Black students in 2025 than 2024.[19]

Figure 1 shows the changes in racial and ethnic shares among the top 20 national universities in the *U.S. and World Report*'s rankings. Compared with the three-year average of students admitted prior to the *Students for Fair Admissions* decision (2021-23), by 2025, the Hispanic share dropped about 3 percentage points, and the Black share by about 2 percentage points. To the surprise of those who thought the decision was a ploy to boost the prospects of white people, white shares also declined 4 percentage points. Meanwhile, Asian-Americans have been the biggest beneficiaries of the ban on racial preferences. Their shares at elite colleges increased by 7 percentage points, which bolsters allegations that the old regime of racial preferences hurt Asian Americans. The share not disclosing their race or ethnicity increased by 4 percentage points. (Students who identify as having two or more races remained flat).

Three points about the data are worth noting. First, Black and Hispanic shares dropped between 2024 and 2025, even though both classes were admitted in a post-*SFFA* legal environment. One key difference between the two classes was the election of Donald Trump as president. Some colleges, wishing not to become ensnared in the Trump administration's crusade against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, may have taken an overly conservative approach to admissions for the class admitted in 2025. If that is true, it is possible racial diversity numbers will ultimately rebound to 2024 numbers once a new administration comes to power.

FIGURE 1: RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT ELITE U.S. COLLEGES



Source: Progressive Policy Institute
Note: Eleven institutions have submitted IPEDS-consistent demographic ddata for 2025; one institution did not publish data for 2022.

Second, the share of Black students reported in 2025 (5.21%) may be lower than a reasonable observer would see on campus. These data rely on federal numbers that consider multiracial individuals (think Kamala Harris or Barack Obama) not to be Black. Instead, they are broken out separately as "two-or more races." To account for this anomaly, many colleges report data two ways — the way the federal government requires it to (with multiracial students in a separate category) and the way many lay people may experience race (with multiracial students allocated into one or more races.) The difference in reporting can be quite stark. Under the federal way of thinking about race, for example, Yale's first year student population entering in 2025 was 8% Black.[20] But when multiracial students who have indicated having some Black heritage are allocated into more than one racial category, the Black share at Yale jumps to 12%.[21]

Third, the data for 2025 are limited as only 11 schools reported data.

These caveats aside, the big picture is that colleges have managed to contain the fallout from the Supreme Court's decision.

Among the nation's top law schools, meanwhile, another interesting pattern developed. Initially, in the first year after the *Students for Fair Admissions* decision, Harvard Law School drew national headlines for a devastating decline in Black students from 43 in 2023 to just 19 in 2024. As the *New York Times* reported, those 19 students represented "3.4 percent of the class, the lowest numbers since the 1960s."[22] But in 2025, Harvard Law School Black student enrollment soared to 50 students, or 8.6% of the class, a share that was *higher* than when racial preferences were still legal.[23] Other elite law schools, such as Stanford and Yale, admitted more Black students in 2025 than they had during the 2021-23 period when racial preferences were permissible.[24]

Why were Harvard Law and its peers able to surpass their old black enrollment shares? One possibility is that law schools may have been less intimidated by the Trump administration's anti-DEI policies than undergraduate institutions.

Because college and law school admissions are opaque, however, we cannot know precisely how institutions are maintaining racial diversity. It is possible that some are misusing a provision in *Students for Fair Admissions*, which allows admissions officers to consider personal essays where students discuss the impact of racial identity on their lives. But the "personal essay loophole" is exceedingly narrow because it must be employed in a race-neutral manner. If an admissions committee wants to credit a Black student who overcame discrimination because the student showed perseverance, it would also have to credit an Asian American student who faced discrimination or a poor white student who overcame attending lousy schools, because those examples also provide evidence of grit. Justice Sonia Sotomayor's biting dissent referred to the provision as "lipstick on a pig," suggesting she expected it to have little impact.[25]

II. ECONOMIC DIVERSITY

Before *Students for Fair Admissions*, university leaders who had shown admirable concern about fostering racial diversity on campus had mostly given short shrift to socioeconomic diversity. For many years now, the majority of students at Harvard have identified as minorities,

for instance, yet the school has had 15-times more wealthy than lower-income students (and even underrepresented minorities have tended to be relatively well off).[26]

After the Supreme Court's ruling, however, many university leaders announced efforts to create new programs to enroll higher numbers of low-income and working-class students. If racial preferences were illegal, it was still possible to increase the share of students from economically modest backgrounds, a disproportionate share of whom were likely to be Black and Hispanic. A number of institutions eliminated legacy preferences for wealthier students. Many adopted new financial aid programs. Some began sending more recruiters to low-income high schools. Others set explicit goals for boosting economic diversity.[27]

Evidence suggests that the efforts are beginning to pay off. The most commonly available data relies on changes in share of students at each school eligible for federal Pell Grants, which are available to middle- and lower-income undergraduates. (For a family of four with two parents, for example, the maximum adjusted gross income to qualify for a Pell Grant was $76,313 in the 2024-25 school year.)[28]

The Pell data has some important limitations. It can't tell us the full income distribution among students at a college, just the share who qualified for a grant. It also requires caveats when comparing institutions *over time* because Congress changes Pell's eligibility formula periodically and has made changes to simplify financial aid forms. One such set of changes kicked in between the admissions cycles of students entering in 2023 and in 2024.

As a result of these changes, the National College Attainment Network estimates that between 2023-24 and 2025-26, the number of Pell eligible students increased by 418,000 students, or about 4%.[29] (Those eligible for the *maximum* Pell grant increased a whopping 27%).

Some argue that changes in Pell eligibility undermine the claim that universities are opening their doors to more low-income students. Matt Barnum, writing in *Chalkbeat*, claims that changes in eligibility have created an "Elite Illusion," and in fact "not many more" low-income students are enrolling at top colleges.[30] Part of his argument is that data from the National Clearinghouse show that the representation of students from low-income neighborhoods has been stagnant. This is true, and it is a point to which we will return later in this report. But, of course, neighborhood income and family income are two separate things. It is possible that selective universities are focused on students who face one disadvantage (coming from a low-income family) and are placing less emphasis on recruiting those facing a double disadvantage (coming from a low-family income and living in a low-neighborhood income.). The National Clearinghouse also looks at a larger number of colleges than we do in this report.[31]

Moreover, changes that boosted overall Pell eligibility by 4% cannot explain the full rise in socioeconomic diversity seen at many institutions in recent years. For the entering classes in the fall of 2024, for example, UVA increased its share of Pell grant eligible students from 14% five years earlier to 24% — a 71% increase.[32] At Duke, the share of Pell students doubled in just two years, from 11% to 22%.[33]

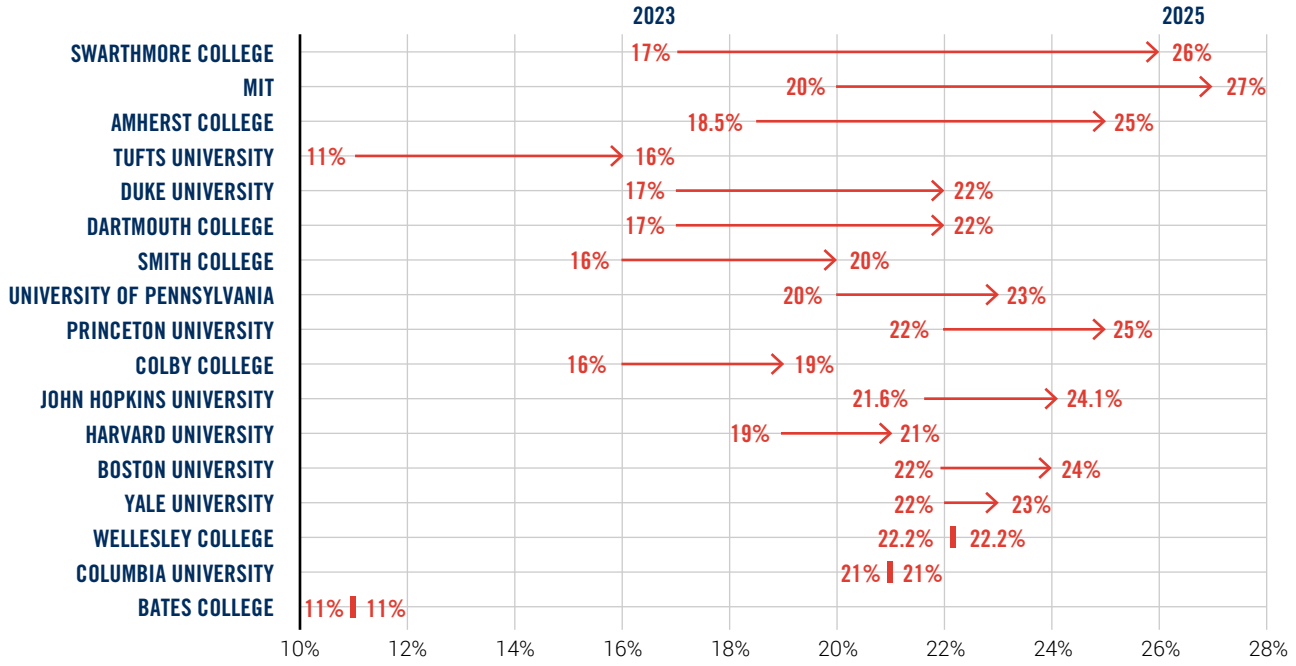
First-generation college-going, which is independent of changes in the Pell formula, also increased at several colleges. At Yale, the admissions dean announced that "the class of 2028 includes the greatest representation of first-generation and low-income students on record."[34] Dartmouth also said it increased its share of first-generation college students to a "record-setting level," and its share of Pell Grant recipients increased five percentage points in a single year to an "all-time high."[35] And at Harvard, the share of first-generation college students tripled from 7% in the freshman class entering in 2015 (around the time litigation was filed challenging Harvard's use of racial preferences) to 21% for the first-year class enrolled in 2024.[36]

Two new analyses suggest the trend toward higher socioeconomic diversity persisted in the classes entering campuses in the fall of 2025. First, we review one analysis conducted by the Associated Press. Second, we report our own data, using a somewhat different methodology.

A. Associated Press Analysis

Data suggest that this trend toward higher socioeconomic diversity persisted through the Fall of 2025. In a December article, Associated Press reporter Collin Binkley concluded that "Some of the country's most prestigious colleges are enrolling record numbers of low-income students — a growing admissions priority in the absence of affirmative action." His analysis was based on data from 17 highly selective colleges, showing that "almost all saw increases in Pell-eligible students between 2023 and this year."[37] Figure 2 shows the data from AP's analysis. Under the AP analysis, MIT increased its Pell representation by 35%, Duke by 29%, Smith by 25%, and so on — increases that all greatly exceeded the overall 4% Pell eligibility increase reported by NCAN.

FIGURE 2: ELITE SCHOOLS ARE ADMITTING MORE PELL STUDENTS



Source: Associated Press (Data collected from colleges and universities)

B. PPI Analysis

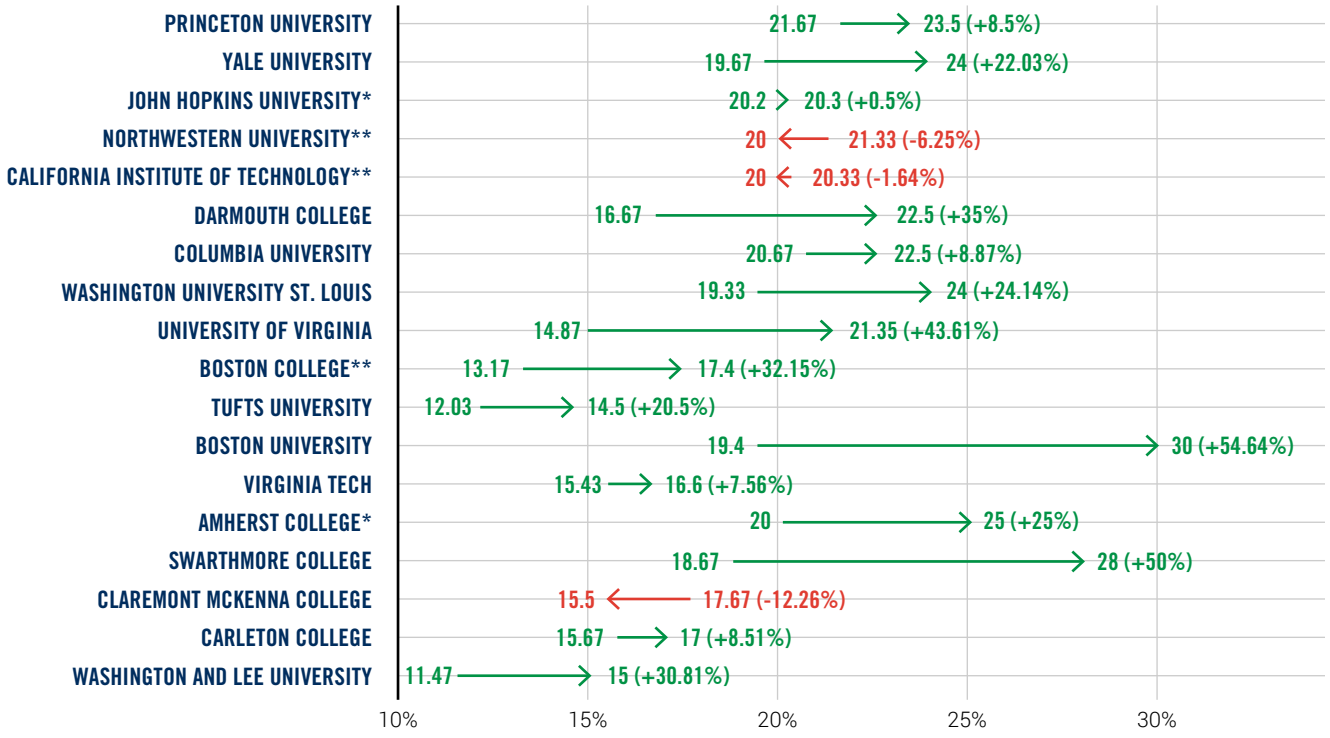
At the Progressive Policy Institute, we conducted our own analysis of trends in socioeconomic diversity using a somewhat different methodology. Rather than seeking responses from universities, we examined publicly available data on the share of Pell students at a relatively large number of institutions: the top 75 national universities and the top 25 liberal arts colleges in the *U.S. News* rankings.

Because these institutions did not consistently report Pell data, we focused on a subset of those institutions that reported publicly available data for at least *four of the past five years* (three years prior to the 2023 Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, and the two years after the ruling). Eighteen institutions provided this full set of data.

Consistent with the Associated Press's findings, PPI found that 15 of 18 (or 83%) of top-rated institutions have seen increases in Pell shares. Some of the increases were quite large, including Tufts (21%), Yale (22%), Amherst (25%), Washington University in St. Louis (24%), Washington & Lee (31%), Boston College (32%), Dartmouth (35%), UVA (44%), Swarthmore (50%), and Boston University (55%). (See Figure 3). For a full presentation of the data, see Appendix 1.

Of the 17 institutions represented in the AP data and the 18 in PPI's analysis, nine overlapped. Accordingly, between the two sets of data, a total of 26 distinct institutions are included in one or the other analysis.

FIGURE 3: PELL GRANT ELIGIBILITY 2021, 2022, AND 2023 COMPARED TO 2024 AND 2025

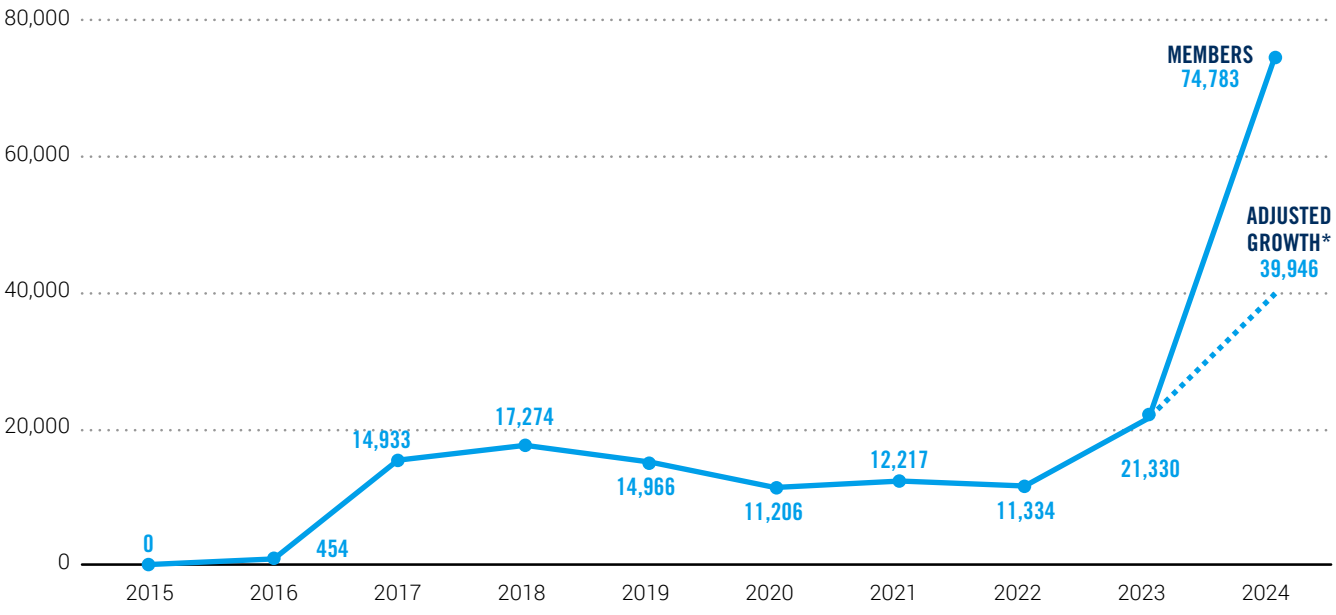


**indicates that school has not published Pell Grant data for class of 2025 | **indicates that school has not published Pell Grant data for class of 2029*
Source: Progressive Policy Institute

C. Increase in Pell-Eligible Transfer Students. The data presented by AP and PPI relate to students entering their first year. But many selective colleges have also ramped up efforts to increase socioeconomic diversity by admitting substantial numbers of Pell-eligible transfer students. About 140 selective colleges and universities are part of the Aspen Institute's American Talent Initiative (ATI), begun in 2016 with funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies. ATI colleges increased the number of Pell Grant students by 75,000 between 2015 and 2024. Some of the increase came as a result of first-year entrants, but the largest gains in 2024 were among transfers. The ATI estimates that colleges boosted their Pell shares above and beyond what Pell eligibility changes would suggest.[38]

The timing of the increases is telling. In September 2022, prior to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Students for Fair Admissions, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the program was falling short of its goals. The headline read: "Many Colleges Fail to Push to Boost Enrollment of Lower-Income Students."[39] But following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2023, the share of Pell Grant students surged dramatically, even adjusting for the change in Pell eligibility. Indeed, the ATI adjusted calculation showed colleges boosted low-income enrollment in 2024 almost as much (18,616 students) as in the previous eight years combined (21,330 students compared with the 2015 baseline). See Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: ATI MEMBER GROWTH IN LOWER-INCOME STUDENT ENROLLMENT RELATIVE TO 2015



Source: American Talent Initiative

III. A PATH FORWARD

The good news is that in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision ending racial preferences, selective colleges are beginning to adapt by opening opportunities to more low-income and working-class students than in the past. Many top colleges have seen both record-setting increases in economic diversity, and almost all have prevented the catastrophic decline in racial diversity forecasted in Supreme Court amicus briefs.

Broadly speaking, the increase in Pell representation is likely to have had a positive impact on racial diversity, since underrepresented minority students are more likely than white students to receive the grants. In the 2015-16 school year, for example, 72% of full-time full-year undergraduate Black students received Pell Grants, as did 60% of Hispanic students, 36% of Asian American students, and 34% of white students.[40] Enhancing economic diversity, Duke's admissions dean said, "was clearly helpful to us in terms of racial diversity in enrollment."[41]

A. The Need to Do More on Both Economic and Racial Diversity

Even with considerable progress on socioeconomic diversity, there is more that universities and public officials can do to ensure that low-income and working-class students of all races will benefit. As noted above, Asian American students have been the big beneficiaries of the shift away from racial preferences to economic affirmative action. In the future, universities can do more to ensure that Black and Hispanic students — who on average face extra economic obstacles compared to white and Asian American students of the *same income* — receive a fair shake. Focusing on family income (which is captured in Pell Grant eligibility) is a good first step. But stopping there is unfair to students who face other economic obstacles as well, such as growing up in a high-poverty neighborhood or from a family with very little net wealth. Omitting these additional variables especially tips the scales against Black and Hispanic students on average, for reasons we explain further later.

It's unclear just how much the recent push by colleges to enroll more economically disadvantaged students has helped racial minorities. At the 18 institutions PPI tracked, changes in the share of freshmen receiving Pell Grants did not always correlate with the changes in Black and Hispanic enrollment. Princeton, for example, increased its Pell population but saw a decline in Black representation in 2025. Northwestern, by the same token, failed to see a Pell Grant increase (in the one year for which data were available) but saw an increase in Black shares. (Data on race for these institutions is included in Appendix 2.)

We do not know what is happening behind the admissions curtain, so we can only speculate why racial diversity and the Pell population aren't always neatly tracking together at schools. Princeton may be so focused on Pell shares that it ignored the wealth and neighborhood factors that are important to include as a matter of fairness and are likely to disproportionately benefit Black students. And, it is possible that Northwestern is looking at the wealth and neighborhood of students in a way that does not show up in the Pell data. Or it is possible that Northwestern is employing discussions of race in student essays in a way not intended by

the U.S. Supreme Court and thereby achieving high levels of racial diversity in a legally dubious manner.

B. Legal Methods to Boost Economic and Racial Diversity Further

Colleges should take a number of additional steps to boost economic and racial diversity, and public policy makers should create carrots and sticks for colleges to do so.

1. What Colleges Should Do

Colleges can take four additional steps: boost Pell shares further; recruit students from low-income neighborhoods; provide extra consideration for low-wealth applicants; and eliminatee legacy preferences.

a. Boost Pell Shares Further

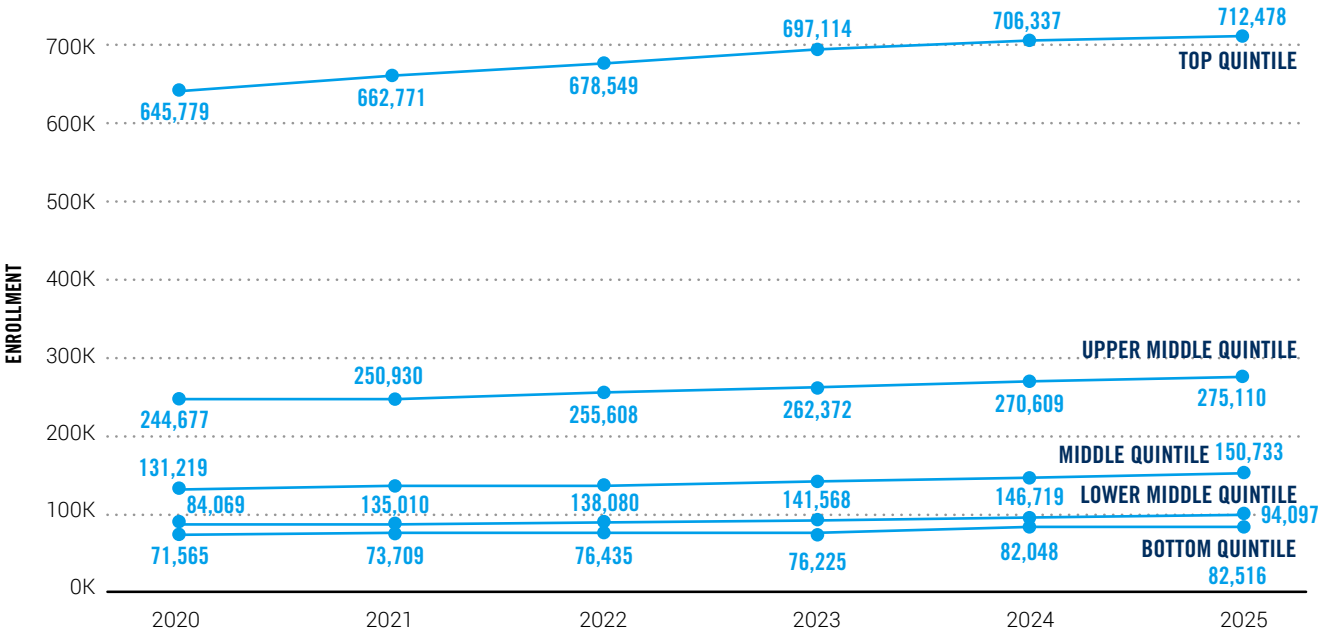
To begin with, selective colleges can increase their share of Pell-eligible students higher than they already have. Most selective colleges still fall short of the national average, which in the 2023-24 school year stood at 32.4%.[42]

b. Recruit Students from Low-Income Neighborhoods

Second, colleges should do more to recruit high-achieving students from low-income neighborhoods. A number of studies finds that growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood imposes costs on a student's ability to excel academically. Students who can achieve at high levels despite being born into an unlucky zip code may have more potential than a student with somewhat higher grades and test scores who grew up in an affluent neighborhood with better schools. Counting neighborhood status as a factor in admissions will also disproportionately benefit Black and Hispanic students, since middle income Black Americans typically live in neighborhoods with higher poverty levels than low-income whites, due to racial segregation in housing.[43]

Selective colleges have a long way to go in this regard. Indeed, a 2026 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that between 2023 and 2025, the share of students at selective colleges coming from wealthy neighborhoods increased, suggesting that these colleges are not engaging in a new affirmative action based on neighborhood. See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: FALL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT AT HIGHLY SELECTIVE FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS BY NEIGHBORHOOD INCOME



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Final Fall Enrollment Trends, January 15, 2026, Figure 2.4 https://nscresearchcenter.org/final-fall-enrollment-trends/

c. Provide Extra Consideration of Low Wealth Applicants

Third, colleges should give preferences to students from families with lower net-worths, regardless of their income, since research suggests that wealth predicts opportunity in America. This approach is also likely to increase racial diversity. Black households make about 60% of what white households make in annual income, but typically only have 10% of the wealth of white households. That's in large measure because wealth, which is handed down through generations, captures America's history of slavery, segregation, and redlining better than income does.[44]

As with respect to neighborhood poverty, most colleges appear not to be considering the wealth of students as a factor in admissions. In the late 1990s, after racial preferences were banned in California, the University of California at Los Angeles Law School pioneered the use of wealth as an admissions factor and began applicants to indicate family wealth within broad ranges.[45] In the fall 2002 entering class, Black students were 11.4 times as likely to be admitted using wealth and income and other socioeconomic criteria as through other admissions programs, and Hispanic students were 5.6 times as likely to be admitted.[46] But there is little evidence from college applications that other institutions have adopted this important step for inquiring about an applicant's net worth.

d. Eliminate Legacy Preferences

Fourth, colleges should eliminate barriers to economic and racial diversity such as preferences for the children of alumni. Legacy preferences disproportionately benefit wealthy

and white students.[47] Many universities have seen the wisdom of dispensing with this anachronistic practice, which rewards lineage rather than merit. After the Supreme Court decision on racial preferences, a slew of universities announced they would end preferences for alumni children. Nevertheless, a number of institutions, including every member of the Ivy League, has stubbornly held onto the practice.[48] Ending this affirmative action for the wealthy is low hanging fruit.

2. What Policymakers Should Do

Policymakers have a variety of sticks and carrots at their disposal to encourage selective colleges to take steps to open their doors to more low-income and working-class students. Donald Trump's efforts to micromanage colleges have properly raised alarm bells about federal overreach. But measured efforts to encourage institutions that receive large federal subsidies to serve the public interest make good sense. Although colleges have made a great deal of progress in moving away from racial preferences to economic affirmative action in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on the use of race in admissions, they still have a long way to go. Public policy can play a constructive role in maintaining momentum and preventing backsliding.

a. Provide Carrots and Sticks on the Endowment Tax

To begin with, the university endowment tax, which currently applies to a small number of elite universities, could be dialed up or dialed down to encourage those universities to open their doors to more high-achieving low-income and working-class students. Currently, about 20 wealthy colleges pay a modest endowment tax that ranges from 1.4% to 8%, depending upon the size of the endowment per student.[49] Even at the maximum 8% rate, the endowment tax is much lower than the maximum possible rate individuals pay on certain types of investment income (about 40%) or the top corporate rate of 21%.[50]

Private universities receive enormous public subsidies in the form of tax breaks because they are deemed to be serving the public interest. In 2015, before a modest endowment tax was put in place, researchers estimated that that tax breaks provided to Princeton in New Jersey amounted to $105,000 per student compared with $12,300 at New Jersey's flagship institution, Rutgers, and $2,400 at nearby Essex County College.[51]

To ensure that colleges receiving large public subsidies are serving the core American value of promoting social mobility, the endowment tax should be adjusted upward on bad actors and downward on good actors.[52]

b. Ending Federal Subsidies of Legacy Preferences

Second, policymakers could take steps to encourage colleges to end legacy preferences. Such preferences provide a substantial boost in admissions — the equivalent of scoring 160 points higher on the SAT — to applicants, not based on individual merit or hard work, but based on whether their parents are alumni.[53] First-generation college students are, by definition, ineligible.

Several states have outlawed legacy preferences at public, and sometimes private, colleges within their jurisdictions.[54] And in the U.S. Senate, Republican Todd Young has

joined Democrat Tim Kaine, and Republican John Kennedy has joined Democrat Jeff Merkley, to end federal subsidies for institutions that employ legacy preferences.[55]

Colleges that wish to employ legacy preferences in order to build a sense of intergenerational community or to entice donations from alumni would be free to do so. But they would lose federal subsidies on the grounds that basing admission on lineage is a form of ancestry discrimination at odds with the Jeffersonian tradition of creating in America a true aristocracy of talent and virtue rather than an artificial aristocracy based on wealth and birth.[56]

c. Require Disclosure of Socioeconomic Data

Colleges should be obligated to disclose detailed income data on an annual basis, just as they are currently required to disclose detailed racial data. It would be good to know the full spectrum of income data, broken down by quintile, as a supplement to the crude income data provided on eligibility for Pell grants. A Trump administration executive order would require[57] additional income data from colleges, but this concept should be codified into law.

C. Efforts to Boost Socioeconomic Diversity, and as a Consequence Racial Diversity, are Legally Viable

Some conservatives (including officials in the Trump administration) have attacked socioeconomic affirmative action as a form of illegal "proxy discrimination" if part of the motive is racial diversity. In an August 1, 2025, letter to the University of California at Los Angeles, for example, a National Science Foundation official claimed that considering factors such as "an applicant's neighborhood, zip code, family income, and school profile" amounts to "a transparent attempt to engage in race-based admissions in all but name."[58]

These efforts are very unlikely to prevail. To begin with, a majority of Supreme Court justices were clear in their landmark 2023 decision, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, that using socioeconomic factors is perfectly legal. In his concurring opinion in the *Students for Fair Admissions* case, for example, Justice Neil Gorsuch pointed favorably to the idea that "Harvard could nearly replicate the current racial composition of its student body without resorting to race-based practices if it: 1. provided socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants just *half* of the tip it gives recruited athletes; and 2. eliminated tips for the children of donors, alumni, and faculty."[59]

In oral arguments before the Court over the use of race in admissions at Harvard and the University of North Carolina, the justices peppered Students for Fair Admissions about whether it would challenge policies like socioeconomic preferences as a form of proxy discrimination. In response, Patrick Strawbridge, a lawyer for Students for Fair Admissions, said that while SFFA would likely oppose "a pure proxy for race" such as a preference for the descendants of those who were enslaved, other programs — such as socioeconomic or geographic preferences — would be legal because there would be a "race-neutral justification" for adopting those plans. Strawbridge declared, "If the only reason to do it [adopt a race-neutral strategy] is through the narrow lens of race and there is no other race-neutral justification, that's the only scenario where it would create problems."[60] As noted

above, socioeconomic affirmative action can be justified on multiple grounds — as a way to pursue true merit (accomplishments in light of hurdles surmounted), and to achieve the benefits of socioeconomic diversity — as well as to achieve more racial diversity.[61]

Since the 2023 *SFFA* decision, further evidence has emerged that economic affirmative action programs are on solid legal ground. In 2024, when the Pacific Legal Foundation pressed the argument that using socioeconomic and geographic factors constitutes "proxy discrimination," the Supreme Court twice turned down the opportunity to pursue that path. Over the vigorous dissents of the most conservative justices, the Court declined to hear a case involving Thomas Jefferson High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, in February and another involving the Boston Exam Schools in December.[62]

D. A Good Development for Social Cohesion

As the nation's political landscape becomes increasingly polarized, it is especially important to find policies that can attract support from a broad cross-section of the public, and ideally help Americans find more common ground.

The great civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, who was a key advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was always attracted to affirmative action based on economic need rather than race because it would strengthen social cohesion. In a 1987 address commemorating Dr. King, Rustin declared: "Any preferential approach postulated along racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual lines will only disrupt a multicultural society and lead to a backlash." By contrast, he noted, "special treatment can be provided to those who have been exploited or denied opportunities if solutions are predicated along class lines, precisely because all religious, ethnic, and racial groups have a depressed class who would benefit."[63]

Economic affirmative action can bring students of different races and economic backgrounds together in a way that avoids the divisiveness of racial preferences. Low-income and working-class students bring a set of life experiences to campus that differ from those who grew up in more economically privileged environments. They may help diversify ideological viewpoints on campus, too, because students growing up in working-class families are likely to bring more culturally conservative views on average than the typical elite college student.[63] Economic diversity will also diversify America's leadership class, bringing the perspective of those who've struggled economically to spaces where important decisions are made.

In the nation's 250th year since the Declaration of Independence, as the country grows ever more diverse, it is crucial to find policies that bring Americans of all races, ethnicities, and religions together to strengthen a common American identity. Universities are engaging in an important shift from policies that benefit students based on racial identity to those that engage students of all backgrounds who have demonstrated achievement in the face of economic hurdles. The new economic affirmative action is showing important signs of success that must be built upon in the years to come.

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APPENDIX 1: CHANGES IN PERCENTAGE OF PELL ELGIBLE STUDENTS

INSTITUTION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY	22	21	22	22	25	21.67	23.5	8.46%	1.83
YALE UNIVERSITY	17	20	22	25	23	19.67	24	22.03%	4.3
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY		21	19.4	20.3	20.3	20.2	20.3	0.50%	0.1
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY	21	22	21	20		21.33	20	-6.25%	-1.3
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY	20	20	21	20		20.33	20	-1.64%	-0.33
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE	16	17	17	23	22	16.67	22.5	35.00%	5.83
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY	19	22	21	24	21	20.67	22.5	8.87%	1.83
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS	17	20	21	25	23	19.33	24	24.14%	4.67
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA	13.9	14.3	16.4	22.4	20.3	14.87	21.35	43.61%	6.48
BOSTON COLLEGE	13.8	12.9	12.8	18.8	16	13.17	17.4	32.15%	4.23
TUFTS UNIVERSITY	12.1	12	12	13	16	12.03	14.5	20.50%	2.47
BOSTON UNIVERSITY	17.2	19	22	30		19.4	30	54.64%	10.6
VIRGINIA TECH	16.2	15.2	14.9	15.3	17.9	15.43	16.6	7.56%	1.17
AMHERST COLLEGE		21	19	25	25	20	25	25.00%	5
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE	19	20	17	30	26	18.67	28	50.00%	9.33
CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE	22	18	13	16	15	17.67	15.5	-12.26%	-2.17
CARLETON COLLEGE	12	17	18	16	18	15.67	17	8.51%	1.33
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY	10.4	11	13	15	15	11.47	15	30.81%	3.53

APPENDIX 2: CHANGES IN RACIAL DIVERSITY AT 18 SELECTIVE COLLEGES

INSTITUTION	NOTES	RACIAL/ETHNIC DESIGNATION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY		Hispanic/Latino	11.34	8.35	9.82	8.96	9.2	9.84	9.08	-0.76	-7.71
		Black or African American	7.92	8.55	9.02	8.88	5	8.50	6.94	-1.55	-18.29
		White	37.58	33.73	31.89	31.34	28.5	34.40	29.92	-4.48	-13.02
		Asian	21.20	25.05	24.19	23.74	27.1	23.48	25.42	1.94	8.26
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	7.38	7.21	7.04	7.18	7.7	7.21	7.44	0.23	3.19
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	2.02	2.00	4.55	7.68	8.2	2.86	7.94	5.08	177.94
YALE UNIVERSITY		Hispanic/Latino	15.51	14.41	17.79	18.60	13	15.91	15.80	-0.11	-0.68
		Black or African American	8.57	9.33	9.51	9.59	8	9.13	8.79	-0.34	-3.73
		White	34.88	31.27	25.59	29.79	29	30.58	29.40	-1.19	-3.88
		Asian	19.71	22.46	24.80	20.59	24	22.32	22.30	-0.03	-0.12
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	7.05	7.53	6.76	6.44	8	7.12	7.22	0.10	1.43
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	2.30	2.90	3.41	3.54	7	2.87	5.27	2.40	83.74
JOHN HOPKINS UNIVERSITY		Hispanic/Latino	21.41	23.04	20.80	10.66	10.1	21.75	10.38	-11.37	-52.29
		Black or African American	9.65	10.81	9.80	3.46	4	10.09	3.73	-6.36	-63.04
		White	20.07	16.64	19.25	21.02	21	18.66	21.01	2.36	12.63
		Asian	24.79	26.46	25.60	40.82	45.1	25.62	42.96	17.34	67.71
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	6.55	6.83	6.84	5.76	4.1	6.74	4.93	-1.81	-26.85
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	1.90	1.71	1.62	3.02	2.1	1.74	2.56	0.82	46.95
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY		Hispanic/Latino	16.83	14.92	17.29	18.15	14	16.34	16.07	-0.27	-1.66
		Black or African American	7.38	8.29	8.57	10.93	9	8.08	9.96	1.88	23.26
		White	34.66	33.27	28.80	25.08	25	32.24	25.04	-7.20	-22.33
		Asian	19.22	21.44	23.16	19.71	25	21.28	22.36	1.08	5.08
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	7.86	8.19	8.57	7.51	8	8.21	7.75	-0.46	-5.57
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	3.60	3.43	3.17	5.13	7	3.40	6.07	2.66	78.32

INSTITUTION	NOTES	RACIAL/ETHNIC DESIGNATION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY		Hispanic/Latino	29.63	18.30	10.53	10.09	8.5	19.49	9.30	-10.19	-52.30
		Black or African American	4.44	4.91	4.14	5.50	1.6	4.50	3.55	-0.94	-21.00
		White	15.93	19.64	21.05	19.72	19.8	18.87	19.76	0.89	4.71
		Asian	27.78	36.61	39.47	41.28	40.3	34.62	40.79	6.17	17.83
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	12.22	6.25	6.77	7.80	5.2	8.41	6.50	-1.91	-22.75
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	0.00	0.45	0.00	0.00	9.3	0.15	4.65	4.50	3,027.80
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE	Has not released specific race and ethnicity data for 2025	Hispanic/Latino	10.48	9.16	8.54	11.00		9.40	11.00	1.60	17.05
		Black or African American	6.06	6.05	6.22	5.92		6.11	5.92	-0.19	-3.07
		White	46.93	45.28	44.69	40.95		45.64	40.95	-4.69	-10.27
		Asian	12.61	13.70	14.68	12.69		13.66	12.69	-0.97	-7.12
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	7.37	7.38	7.79	8.29		7.52	8.29	0.77	10.30
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	1.47	2.05	2.57	5.67		2.03	5.67	3.64	179.20
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY	Has released race and ethnicity data for 2025, but allows students to select multiple options	Hispanic/Latino	17.44	19.55	18.57	15.98		18.52	15.98	-2.54	-13.70
		Black or African American	10.00	8.95	10.04	6.20		9.67	6.20	-3.46	-35.81
		White	30.45	25.50	25.10	25.83		27.02	25.83	-1.19	-4.40
		Asian	19.94	19.62	20.15	26.30		19.90	26.30	6.40	32.14
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	6.99	8.34	7.70	6.47		7.68	6.47	-1.20	-15.67
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	1.60	1.50	1.44	1.75		1.52	1.75	0.24	15.59
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS	Has released race and ethnicity data for 2025, but allows students to select multiple options	Hispanic/Latino	13.08	13.84	14.11	12.94		13.68	12.94	-0.74	-5.41
		Black or African American	8.84	8.33	7.99	5.74		8.38	5.74	-2.65	-31.55
		White	43.89	37.89	35.67	37.14		39.15	37.14	-2.01	-5.13
		Asian	20.66	22.01	23.19	22.31		21.95	22.31	0.35	1.61
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	6.72	6.45	7.11	5.04		6.76	5.04	-1.73	-25.52
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	1.11	0.99	0.98	5.20		1.03	5.20	4.17	405.03

INSTITUTION	NOTES	RACIAL/ETHNIC DESIGNATION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA		Hispanic/Latino	8.55	7.54	7.14	9.04	9.13	7.74	9.09	1.34	17.36
		Black or African American	8.65	8.11	8.17	7.25	6.07	8.31	6.66	-1.65	-19.88
		White	52.28	47.36	46.67	46.25	47.64	48.77	46.95	-1.82	-3.74
		Asian	24.89	19.98	21.86	20.20	19.14	22.24	19.67	-2.57	-11.56
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	8.00	5.80	5.82	5.63	6.17	6.54	5.90	-0.64	-9.76
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	5.63	5.65	4.89	6.34	6.07	5.39	6.20	0.81	15.09
BOSTON COLLEGE	Has not released specific race and ethnicity data for 2025	Hispanic/Latino	11.80	11.86	12.89	14.49		12.19	14.49	2.31	18.94
		Black or African American	4.21	6.94	5.57	4.76		5.57	4.76	-0.81	-14.55
		White	60.25	58.33	56.40	52.84		58.33	52.84	-5.49	-9.41
		Asian	11.33	13.19	10.41	12.41		11.64	12.41	0.76	6.57
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	4.25	0.09	6.08	5.68		3.47	5.68	2.21	63.49
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	1.83	1.93	1.37	2.09		1.71	2.09	0.38	22.25
TUFTS UNIVERSITY		Hispanic/Latino	11.00	9.68	9.28	10.06	12	9.99	11.03	1.04	10.45
		Black or African American	6.78	7.26	6.40	4.06	6	6.81	5.03	-1.78	-26.18
		White	42.22	40.73	40.86	41.75	45	41.27	43.37	2.10	5.09
		Asian	15.33	16.23	17.75	17.34	19	16.44	18.17	1.73	10.53
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	8.56	7.91	9.22	6.73	9	8.56	7.86	-0.70	-8.17
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	3.72	5.19	4.38	6.84	9	4.43	7.92	3.49	78.65
BOSTON UNIVERSITY	Has not released specific race and ethnicity data for 2025	Hispanic/Latino	8.25	11.61	12.81	11.69		10.89	11.69	0.80	7.32
		Black or African American	4.86	7.95	8.97	3.12		7.26	3.12	-4.14	-57.01
		White	35.30	30.01	29.22	30.35		31.51	30.35	-1.16	-3.67
		Asian	20.29	19.15	18.06	22.03		19.17	22.03	2.86	14.95
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	4.61	4.26	4.10	5.63		4.33	5.63	1.30	30.15
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	3.47	3.88	2.73	4.38		3.36	4.38	1.02	30.25

INSTITUTION	NOTES	RACIAL/ETHNIC DESIGNATION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
VIRGINIA TECH		Hispanic/Latino	10.46	10.94	10.59	7.27	11.16	10.66	9.22	-1.45	-13.57
		Black or African American	6.93	6.89	6.31	4.66	5.58	6.71	5.12	-1.59	-23.68
		White	59.30	58.01	56.36	55.91	52.66	57.89	54.28	-3.61	-6.24
		Asian	12.76	11.72	12.97	15.52	15.24	12.48	15.38	2.89	23.19
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	5.11	5.87	5.88	5.87	6.52	5.62	6.20	0.57	10.22
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	3.30	3.06	2.67	4.69	4.08	3.01	4.39	1.38	45.73
AMHERST COLLEGE		Hispanic/Latino	17.32	16.06	12.30	10.42	16	15.22	13.21	-2.02	-13.24
		Black or African American	11.87	10.49	10.86	2.92	6	11.07	4.46	-6.62	-59.74
		White	35.80	37.47	34.02	37.50	40	35.76	38.75	2.99	8.35
		Asian	14.40	12.21	18.65	20.42	12	15.08	16.21	1.13	7.46
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	7.98	9.85	9.63	7.71	11	9.15	9.35	0.20	2.20
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	0.78	1.50	1.84	5.00	6	1.37	5.50	4.13	300.38
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE		Hispanic/Latino	13.88	13.39	18.07	16.39	16	15.11	16.20	1.08	7.16
		Black or African American	9.47	11.09	8.92	7.96	8	9.82	7.98	-1.84	-18.76
		White	31.72	29.56	27.71	32.55	31	29.66	31.78	2.11	7.12
		Asian	16.08	17.32	15.66	17.33	17	16.35	17.17	0.81	4.96
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	9.69	10.62	13.98	10.07	11	11.43	10.54	-0.90	-7.83
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	2.64	3.70	1.69	3.51	3	2.67	3.26	0.58	21.72
CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE		Hispanic/Latino	16.76	15.84	11.53	16.32	11	14.71	13.66	-1.05	-7.13
		Black or African American	5.87	5.90	1.56	3.56	3	4.44	3.28	-1.16	-26.14
		White	33.80	33.54	41.12	33.23	30	36.15	31.62	-4.54	-12.55
		Asian	13.97	17.08	16.20	20.18	26	15.75	23.09	7.34	46.61
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	5.59	9.01	11.53	8.01	9	8.71	8.51	-0.20	-2.30
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	6.15	3.73	4.05	4.45	7	4.64	5.73	1.08	23.38

INSTITUTION	NOTES	RACIAL/ETHNIC DESIGNATION	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	PRE-SFFA	POST-SFFA	PERCENT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE
CARLETON COLLEGE	Has released race and ethnicity data for 2025, but allows students to select multiple options	Hispanic/Latino	8.65	11.09	10.41	9.07		10.05	9.07	-0.98	-9.72
		Black or African American	5.59	6.77	6.88	4.14		6.41	4.14	-2.27	-35.38
		White	53.87	48.68	49.44	50.49		50.67	50.49	-0.17	-0.34
		Asian	8.83	12.03	11.71	10.45		10.86	10.45	-0.40	-3.71
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	8.83	9.40	9.29	9.07		9.17	9.07	-0.10	-1.10
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	2.70	1.88	2.04	5.72		2.21	5.72	3.51	158.96
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY	Has not released specific race and ethnicity data for 2025	Hispanic/Latino	8.68	8.19	9.76	8.26		8.88	8.26	-0.61	-6.92
		Black or African American	4.13	3.99	4.98	4.87		4.37	4.87	0.50	11.56
		White	69.42	68.70	66.93	66.31		68.35	66.31	-2.04	-2.98
		Asian	4.75	4.83	4.98	5.08		4.85	5.08	0.23	4.74
		Two or more races, non-Hispanic	5.58	4.83	3.19	4.03		4.53	4.03	-0.51	-11.19
		Race and/or ethnicity unknown	0.83	0.63	1.79	2.12		1.08	2.12	1.04	95.60

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