

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is a darker shade of blue. The hourglass is centered on the page.

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*High School Completion and Postsecondary Enrollment
Among First Generation and Low-Income Students*

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Abstract. The Higher Education Act (HEA) supports several programs that provide services and incentives to disadvantaged students to help increase their educational attainment. Foremost among these programs are the federal TRIO programs and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (Gear Up). These programs are primarily intended for individuals who are from low-income families and would be the first in their family to attain a college degree. This report reviews available data on these populations and attempts to measure the extent to which high school graduates from these groups go on to college.

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High School Completion and Postsecondary Enrollment Among First Generation and Low-Income Students

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Summary

The Higher Education Act (HEA) supports several programs that provide services and incentives to disadvantaged students to help increase their educational attainment. Foremost among these programs are the federal TRIO programs and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (Gear Up). These programs are primarily intended for individuals who are from low-income families and would be the first in their family to attain a college degree. This report reviews available data on these populations and attempts to measure the extent to which high school graduates from these groups go on to college. This report is intended as a supplement to CRS Report RL31622, *TRIO and Gear Up Programs: Status and Issues*, and will not be updated.

Consideration of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) during the 109th Congress could raise a variety of issues regarding access to postsecondary education. Improving access through early outreach is the major goal of the TRIO and Gear Up programs, which are contained in HEA's Title IV, Subpart 2. This outreach is particularly focused on students from low-income families whose parents did not attain a Bachelor's degree.¹ This report addresses two related questions regarding college access among these students, (1) how large is the population of first generation and low-income students; and (2) to what extent do these students successfully make the transition from high school completion to college enrollment?

¹ According to the TRIO authorizing statute (§ 402A(g)), low-income students are defined as those living in families with income below 150% of the official poverty threshold and first generation college students are defined as those whose parents did not complete a Bachelor's degree. These definitions will be applied throughout this report.

About half of the 2.8 million high school graduates in the 1999-2000 school year were enrolled in college in the fall of 2000.² Sixty-eight percent of the high school class of 2000 were or would be first generation college students; however, among those in this class who were enrolled in college in the fall of 2000, only 57% were first generation. Twenty-one percent of the high school class of 2000 were low-income students; however, among those in this class who were enrolled in college in the fall, only 14% were low-income.

Trends in First Generation and Low-Income Enrollment

The proportion of high school graduates whose parents do not have a college degree has declined over the last three decades, according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Census Bureau.³ Over four out of five graduates in the class of 1972 would have been first generation college students were they to have gone to college compared to two out of three graduates in the class of 2000.⁴ This decline of would be first generation college students roughly coincides with the growth in educational attainment that occurred during the same period. In 1970, 11% of the U.S. population were college graduates and by 2000 this had increased to 24%.⁵

The proportion of high school graduates from families with income below 150% of the official poverty level has remained relatively stable at around 21% over the last 30 years, according to these data. Twenty percent of the class of 1972 lived in low-income families compared to 22% of the class of 2000. This parallels the rate of poverty for the U.S. population as a whole which has fluctuated between 16% and 20% over the same period.⁶

² The number of high school graduates in 2000 is taken from U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2001*. Unless otherwise noted, the proportions reported here are CRS estimates using microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000. In this report, college enrollment is defined as full or part-time attendance in a two- or four-year institution including vocational and technical schools. Comparisons across groups which are discussed in the *text* are tested to be statistically significant; however, not all figures reported in the *tables* are statistically different.

³ Due to the differences in sampling and collection techniques between the various data sources used in this report, statistical tests across data sources cannot be conducted. Therefore, year to year trends and other differences among these sources should be interpreted with caution.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000; and U.S. Department of Education, National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. For more information on these surveys see, U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Technical Paper 63RV: Current Population Survey — Design and Methodology*, March 2002; and U.S. Department of Education, *The National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72) Fifth Follow-Up (1986) Sample Design Report*, July 1987.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Characteristics by Size of Place: 1970*, and Table: DP-2 Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000 available at [<http://factfinder.census.gov/>].

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "People Below 125 Percent of Poverty Level and the Near Poor: 1959 to 2001," September 30, 2002. [<http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/hstpov6.html>].

Similar trends can be seen in the data on college students, although the Department has only begun to collect such data since 1987.⁷ These data indicate modest declines in the proportion of low-income and first generation college students. The proportion of students from low-income families dropped from 16% to 12% between 1987 and 2000. The proportion who, upon graduation, would be the first in their family to get a college degree declined from 65% in 1987 to 62% in 2000.

A second indication from these data is that the representation of first generation and low-income students among those enrolled in college has been consistently lower than among those graduating from high school. Thus, it appears that high school graduates from low-income families and those that lack a parent with a college degree are less likely than other graduates to move on to college.

A Closer Look at the 2000 High School Graduating Class

As stated above, the overall rate of college enrollment for the high school class of 2000 was 53%. That is, just over half of those who graduated in the spring of 2000 were enrolled in college in the fall of that year and just under half were not. The analysis that follows reveals that the rate of enrollment is strongly related to parental educational attainment and family income.

Table 1 shows fall 2000 college enrollment for the high school class of 2000 by parent's education. The rates of enrollment for fall 2000 were 46% for those whose parents did not attain a Bachelor's degree and 75% for those whose parents hold a Bachelor's degree. High school graduates whose parents lack a college degree were more than twice as likely *not* to be enrolled in college the fall after graduation as those whose parents have a college degree (54% compared to 25%).

Table 1. College Enrollment in the Fall of 2000 Among Spring 2000 High School Graduates by Parental Educational Attainment

2000 High school graduates	Parental educational attainment	
	No Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree
Enrolled in college, fall 2000	46%	75%
Not enrolled in college, fall 2000	54%	25%

Source: Current Population Survey.

Note: Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2 displays fall 2000 college enrollment for the high school class of 2000 by family income. The rates of enrollment for the fall of 2000 were 35% for those from families below 150% of the poverty line and 58% for those above 150% of poverty. High school graduates from families below 150% of poverty were over 50% more likely *not*

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study 1999-2000 [NPSAS: 2000] Methodology Report*, June 2002.

to be enrolled in college the fall after graduation as those from families above 150% of poverty (65% compared to 42%).

Table 2. College Enrollment in the Fall of 2000 Among Spring 2000 High School Graduates by Family Income

2000 High school graduates	Family income	
	150% of poverty or less	Above 150% of poverty
Enrolled in college, fall 2000	35%	58%
Not enrolled in college, fall 2000	65%	42%

Source: Current Population Survey.

Note: Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The figures in **Tables 1 and 2** also support the large body of research which has established a strong link between the socio-economic status of parents (including income, occupation, and educational attainment) and that of their children. Since the late 1960s, researchers have documented the various ways that “class background is very important in determining who goes to college.”⁸ Among the indicators of class background used in this research were direct measures like family income and parent’s education and more indirect measures like educational aspirations and college preparedness — all have been found to be positively associated with college attendance and completion.

Combined Effects of First Generation and Income Status

The final section of this report takes a brief look at the combined effects of first generation status and family income on rates of college enrollment. **Table 3** shows rates of college enrollment in the fall of 2000 among those who graduated high school in the spring of 2000 by parental educational attainment and family income.

Table 3 indicates that the rate of college enrollment among students from low-income families is *not* altered by parental education — 69% of those whose parents did not attain a Bachelor’s degree were not enrolled, compared to 66% of those whose parents have a Bachelor’s degree (this difference is not statistically significant). Conversely, **Table 3** reveals that parental educational attainment *is* strongly associated with college attendance among students above 150% of poverty. At this income level, 51% of the graduates whose parents lack a Bachelor’s degree went on to college compared to 75% of the graduates whose parents have a Bachelor’s degree.⁹

⁸ For a general review of this research see, Harold R. Kerbo, *Social Stratification and Inequality: Class Conflict in Historical, Comparative, and Global Perspective* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2000) pp. 363-365.

⁹ Additional analysis finds significant racial/ethnic differences in college enrollment among first generation and non-poor students, but not among non-first generation or poor students. Further analysis indicates that these differences occur only among those in families above the median income. Interestingly, white, non-Hispanic high school graduates from upper income families (continued...)

Table 3. College Enrollment in the Fall of 2000 Among Spring 2000 High School Graduates by Parent's Educational Attainment and Family Income Status

2000 High school graduates	Parental educational attainment	
	No Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
<i>Family income 150% of poverty or less</i>		
Enrolled in college, fall 2000	31%	34%
Not enrolled in college, fall 2000	69%	66%
<i>Family income above 150% of poverty</i>		
Enrolled in college, fall 2000	51%	75%
Not enrolled in college, fall 2000	49%	25%

Source: Current Population Survey.

Note: Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Conclusion

The findings presented here indicate that rates of college enrollment vary greatly by family income and parental educational attainment. Rates of college enrollment among low-income and first generation students were much lower than the overall rate for 2000 high school graduates. In the final analysis of the combined effects of these factors, first generation status was found to have little association with the rate of enrollment of low-income students, but was strongly associated with the rate of enrollment of students from families with greater income.

These results have particularly important implications for the TRIO programs since the legislation stipulates that not less than two-thirds of program participants be *both* low-income *and* first generation students. The results which show that first generation status does not impact upon the enrollment rate of low-income students might lead some to argue for removal of the first generation portion of this requirement. However, since the findings do reveal lower college going rates among first generation students from higher income families, some might argue that the statute should be amended to read “or” rather than “and.” Another possibility would be an amendment to the definition of low-income to include students at greater income levels whose enrollment likelihood is impacted by first generation status.

⁹ (...continued)

whose parents did not get a Bachelor's degree are more likely to enroll in college than corresponding black and Hispanic high school graduates; however, black and Hispanic graduates from upper income families whose parents have a Bachelor's degree are more likely to enroll than corresponding white graduates.