

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has been producing high school graduate forecasts for over 30 years. This publication marks the eighth edition in the series, covering the period from 1996-97 through 2027-28, with projections starting with graduates of the 2009-10 academic year. WICHE is proud to produce these projections by state and race/ethnicity, which have become a trusted source of information for a wide and diverse audience of policymakers, enrollment managers, college counselors, schools and school districts, researchers, and the media.

As in the past this edition updates the projections for graduates of both public and nonpublic high schools for the nation, four geographic regions, and each of the 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Projections disaggregated by race/ethnicity are also available for public high school graduates. This publication includes detailed analysis of the data for the nation and the four regions. Readers are also invited to visit the *Knocking* website ([www.wiche.edu/knocking](http://www.wiche.edu/knocking)), which provides profiles for each state individually and offers an interactive tool for exploring, graphing, and downloading the data.

WICHE's principal goal in generating these projections is to equip decision makers at all levels with information about how the supply of high school graduates is likely to change in the years ahead. Such information is crucial for planning and policymaking, to ensure that educational opportunities beyond high school are both widely available and of high quality. Providing that capacity and quality has never been more vital, as the global economy has spawned an increasingly competitive labor market, which demands high-level skills and innovation and where educational attainment is a profoundly important signal of the capabilities of both individuals and societies. In addition, higher education helps fuel an engaged and healthy citizenry and a civil society (a role that is equally important, if less easily measured). Accordingly, the pressure on the higher education enterprise has never been greater. Policy and practice must be informed by reasonably good estimates of what the future holds in terms of demographic change in order to be effective. One note: Although recent high school graduates are a core component of the demand for a college education, they represent a decreasing share of actual postsecondary enrollments, as more and more adult learners seek to upgrade their skills in response to rising labor market requirements.

Despite the growing need for an educated populace, we face significant challenges in creating one, especially in the wake of the economic recession of 2008. Another challenge: Our projections confirm a future marked by continued demographic change – change that is already reshaping the landscape of recent high school graduates contemplating college and that will only add to the magnitude of the task ahead. Over several editions of the *Knocking* report, our projections have told two stories: one about the overall number of individuals graduating from the nation's high schools, and one that, at least for those graduates of public high schools, indicates that the pool of future college students is rapidly growing more racially and ethnically diverse.

### Changes in the Production of Graduates

The first story addresses changes in the overall supply of high school graduates from both public and nonpublic schools. Policymakers' first concern is to understand how those graduates enter college or the labor force directly, and whether our states and institutions have sufficient capacity to provide those bound for postsecondary education with suitable and affordable options. Projections indicate that the nation can look forward to significant changes in the overall size of the pool of graduates.

- Beginning around 1990 and continuing through about 2011, colleges and universities could count on an annually growing number of students graduating from the nation's high schools. But that period of abundance appears to be about to end. The nation is entering a period of modest decline in the number of graduates being produced, a decline that is closely tied to reduced births in the wake of the Baby Boom Echo.
- The peak occurred in the 2010-11 academic year, when total graduates from public and nonpublic schools reached 3.4 million.
- Production of high school graduates will fall over the immediate term, before settling down at a stable rate between 3.2 and 3.3 million nationally by 2013-14.
- The next period of sustained growth will begin in 2020-21 and continue through 2026-27. During this time national totals of high school graduates are projected to climb about 70,000 (2 percent), a much more gradual rise than the one we saw in the

two decades preceding 2010, and one that will not quite reach the 2010-11 peak.

The change in the number of graduates will vary considerably by region and state. A few states will buck the national trend by continuing to see increases in graduates. These states will face ongoing pressure to ensure adequate capacity exists to fulfill the needs of a growing cohort of individuals looking to continue their education beyond high school. Other states will look ahead to a demographic future of substantial decreases in high school graduates. These states potentially face the opposite problem: sustaining existing infrastructure that was built up over many years. Our projections find that states can expect the following.

- **Dwindling production** (losses of 15 percent or more): The District of Columbia, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont (six states).
- **Slowing production** (losses of between 5 and 15 percent): Alaska, California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (17 states).
- **Manageable decline** (losses of less than 5 percent): Arizona, Delaware, Indiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, Oregon, and West Virginia (seven states).
- **Manageable growth** (increases of less than 5 percent): Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington (12 states).
- **Accelerated expansion** (increases of between 5 and 15 percent): Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Wyoming (six states).
- **Swift expansion** (increases greater than 15 percent): Colorado, Texas, and Utah (three states).

While there is considerable variation among states, broad regional patterns are evident. In general, the South and the West are most likely to continue to see growth, while the Midwest and the Northeast can expect the greatest shrinkage.

## Diversification

The second theme emerging from the projections concerns how rapidly the graduating classes of public high schools are growing more diverse.<sup>1</sup> We project that 45 percent of the nation's public high school graduates will be non-White by 2019-20, compared to 38 percent in the class of 2009. This pattern is driven most obviously by the rapid increase in the number

of Hispanics completing high school, corresponding to a nearly equivalent decline in the number of White non-Hispanics. At the same time, the number of Asians/Pacific Islanders graduating from high school is also rising rapidly, offsetting Black non-Hispanic numbers, which are expected to drop. Nationally, between 2008-09 and 2019-20, the nation's public high schools will collectively produce:

- 228,000 fewer White non-Hispanic graduates (a decline of 12 percent).
- About 197,000 more Hispanic graduates (an increase of 41 percent).
- 49,000 more Asian/Pacific Islander graduates (an increase of 30 percent).
- 41,000 fewer Black non-Hispanic graduates (a decline of 9 percent).
- More than 500 additional American Indian/Alaska Native graduates (an increase of just under 2 percent).

These national trends are reflected in diversification in each and every state, though the pace at which minority populations are gaining shares varies considerably. Between 2008-09 and 2019-20, the number of high school graduates of Hispanic descent is projected to increase noticeably in all states. Asian/Pacific Islander numbers will grow everywhere but in Wisconsin and Hawaii. Only a handful of states can expect to see growth in the number of White non-Hispanics, including Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, and Utah. About half the states will see decreases among Black non-Hispanic graduates of at least 100. Also by 2019-20, our projections indicate that public high school graduating classes in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Nevada will reach "majority-minority" status (where public high schools graduate more minorities than White non-Hispanics), joining California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas, the states which had achieved that distinction by 2008-09.

While the general trend toward greater demographic diversity is recognized by most Americans, understanding the size of the impending change, and its particular makeup, is critical – especially for policymakers and practitioners facing growing pressure to ensure that students succeed. The nation's track record for educating the underrepresented populations has not been particularly good, resulting in persistent educational attainment gaps. Given that our postsecondary education institutions, not to mention our public K-12 schools, will be counted on to serve ever-growing numbers of minority students, as these projections suggest, we need to address the

fact that systems, policies, and practices designed for an earlier, more racially/ethnically homogeneous era will not suffice. More than ever, our national prosperity and security, in a globalized labor market driven by the prevalence of well-educated, highly skilled workers, depend on improving our performance with these populations. Therefore, policymakers and practitioners may need to examine issues of affordability, recruitment, curriculum design and delivery, alignment across educational sectors, effective student support services, and accountability.

## Related Resources

The *Knocking* website ([www.wiche.edu/knocking](http://www.wiche.edu/knocking)) is home to a number of useful resources, including state-by-state profiles and an interactive tool designed to give readers access to customizable data tables and charts. Readers may also obtain electronic copies of this publication there.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The racial/ethnic classifications discussed in this section are not consistent with changes to the federal government's reporting of races/ethnicities that became mandatory in 2010-11. Our projection methodology requires at least five years of consistently defined data, and since more than one year of data reported in the new classifications was unobtainable (in most cases), this edition relies on the five racial/ethnic groups in use prior to the change. More details can be found in Chapter 4.