

Preface

Undergraduate education continues to be one of the most important avenues of opportunity in American society, though the landscape is changing rapidly: there are more options than ever before for how and when Americans receive some form of a college experience. New populations of students attend nonprofit public and private colleges and universities as well as for-profit institutions to earn bachelor's and associate degrees and certificates through face-to-face, online, and hybrid courses. Students of all ages study part time or full time, often at multiple institutions according to schedules that fit their lives, earning credentials ranging from a bachelor's in philosophy after four years of study to a certificate in medical assisting after four months of study. At the same time, emerging opportunities outside of the traditional boundaries of colleges and universities are increasingly responding to learner's needs, blurring the lines across postsecondary educational providers and student learning opportunities.

To address these topics and provide ideas for ensuring that individual Americans receive the education they need to thrive in the twenty-first century, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, with generous funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, established the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education. Over the next several years, the Commission, comprising national leaders in education, business, and government, will study how well students are being served by today's higher education models and will seek to identify the challenges and opportunities that higher education will encounter in the decades ahead.

As a starting point, the Commission requested the creation of a publication that compiled the best data and research available to convey the story of the major trends in undergraduate education through the framework of the student journey into, through, and beyond college. *A Primer on the College Student Journey* will both serve as a foundation for the Commission's ongoing work and be of significant interest to college and university employees, higher education policy-makers and philanthropists, business and industry leaders, and students and their families. This brief volume focuses on the pathways students of various backgrounds follow through the abundance of higher education options ostensibly available to them. Further Commission reports will focus more narrowly on topics including student learning, effective teaching, and financial aid.

In view of the data presented throughout this publication, we want to acknowledge areas of real strength and accomplishment. It is encouraging to see increasingly higher rates of college enrollment across diverse student populations, with almost 90 percent of high school graduates eventually spending some time in college. We are also encouraged by serious efforts at inclusiveness on traditional residential campuses as well as by the expansion of learning opportunities better suited to the goals and life situations of millions of people who in an earlier day could not realistically consider college as an option.

Conversely, our greatest concerns center on the disparities in educational attainment associated with race and ethnicity, income level, and gender. We also note that more students are borrowing more money to pay for college and that those students most likely to default on their loans are those who do not graduate. And we believe that colleges and universities of all types must graduate students at higher rates in a timelier manner.

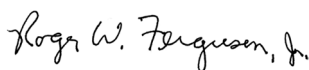
The complexities and challenges our student learners bring to our college campuses need to be at the forefront of our understanding of how our country can best anticipate and respond to their individual needs, as well as the needs of our nation.

We want to thank the Commission's Data Advisory Group—a team of five nationally recognized higher education researchers—who provided invaluable guidance in this data-rich portrait of American postsecondary education, as well as Zack Mabel, Esperanza Johnson, Eliza Berg, and Francesca Purcell, who assisted in its writing.

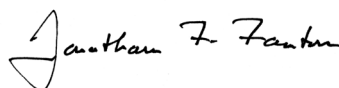
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