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Demography is destiny... or is it?

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Quad 136

Demography is Destiny...or Is It?

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Demography is Destiny...or Is It?



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Census data reveals the changing demography of the United States. In 2011 the majority of babies born were non-Caucasian. This, naturally, allows us to predict that 18 years hence, the majority of the potentially college bound students will be “minority.”

Economists and demographers often say that, “Demography is destiny.” Once a cohort of babies is born, we will not be “making” any more of them. We know how many kindergartners there will be in five or six years; we know how many new voters in 18 years and how many Medicare recipients in 65 years. So, in this sense, a country’s demography is destiny (this, of course, ignores immigration). But some recent commentators have taken this aphorism a bit too far.

National Journal Ron Brownstein argues that recent demographic changes will ensure changes in the education of our workforce. Citing the work of the Brookings Institute demographer William Frey, Brownstein writes:

Frey has calculated that if the U.S. does not improve its college completion rates for young people, the share of Americans holding at least a four-year degree will start to decline as soon as 2020. After that, his model forecasts that the share of college-educated Americans will not climb back to its level in 2015 (just under one-third) at least through 2050. That’s an almost unprecedented prospect for the American economy: The percentage of Americans holding at least a four-year degree has increased steadily since at least 1940, according to the Census Bureau. It’s also an ominous prospect in an international economic competition increasingly centered on knowledge and innovation.

These observations are made by simply taking past trends for education among different demographic groups and extrapolating them into the future. But unlike attending mandatory kindergarten, a college education is a choice. Four factors can change these choices by changing incentives.

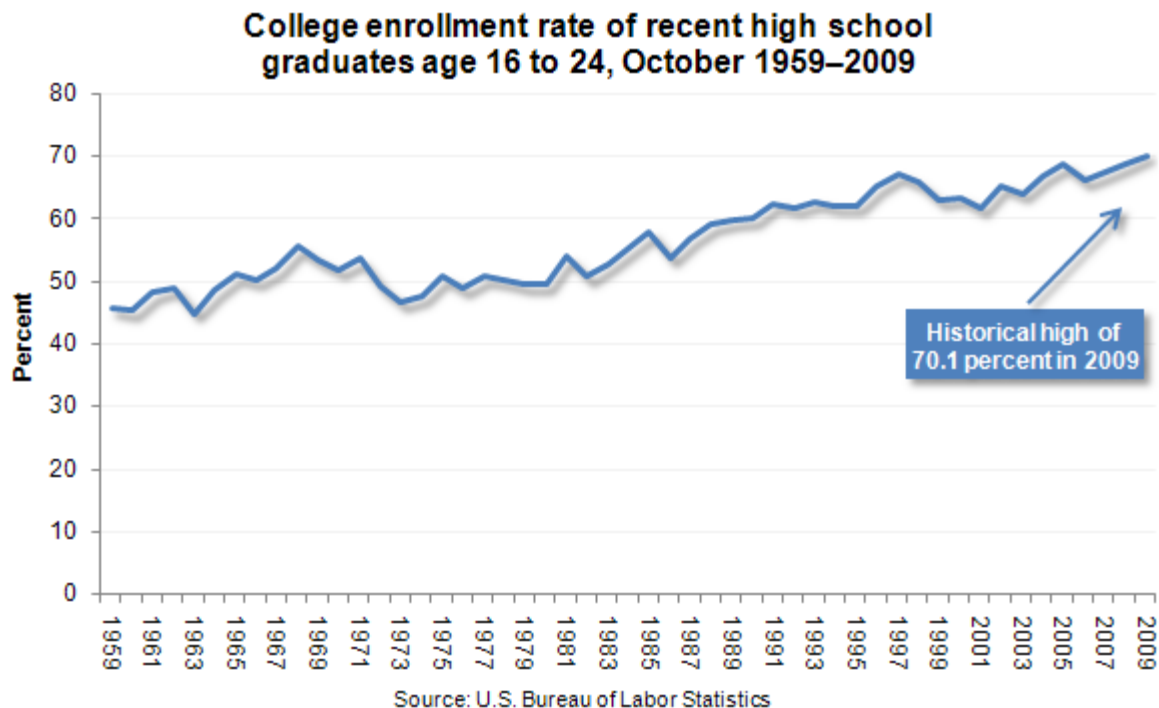
1. Economic conditions and the job market—as the financial premium for a college degree stays high and potentially

increases, the economic incentives for pursuing a college degree get stronger.

2. Parents and students themselves—as parents and their children come to understand how important a college degree will be for a middle class lifestyle in the future, their commitment to education may well change. In particular, parental engagement and the preparation of students in the K-12 years could be affected, leading to better prepared high school graduates.
3. Colleges and universities—as institutions see the demographic changes, they will have incentives to change their recruiting practices and to strengthen their policies to increase retention among students of color once they are on campus. At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University we have already seen increased diversity on our campuses, at a faster rate than we predicted, and our strategic planning process is explicitly considering how we can make our good retention among our new student populations even better.
4. Government policies—even at private schools, policies like the Pell grant program, guaranteed student loans and the GI Bill have all had an impact on college enrollment over time. Though budgets are obviously tight at both the federal and state level, the choices we make through our legislators can have a significant impact on college enrollment and completion.

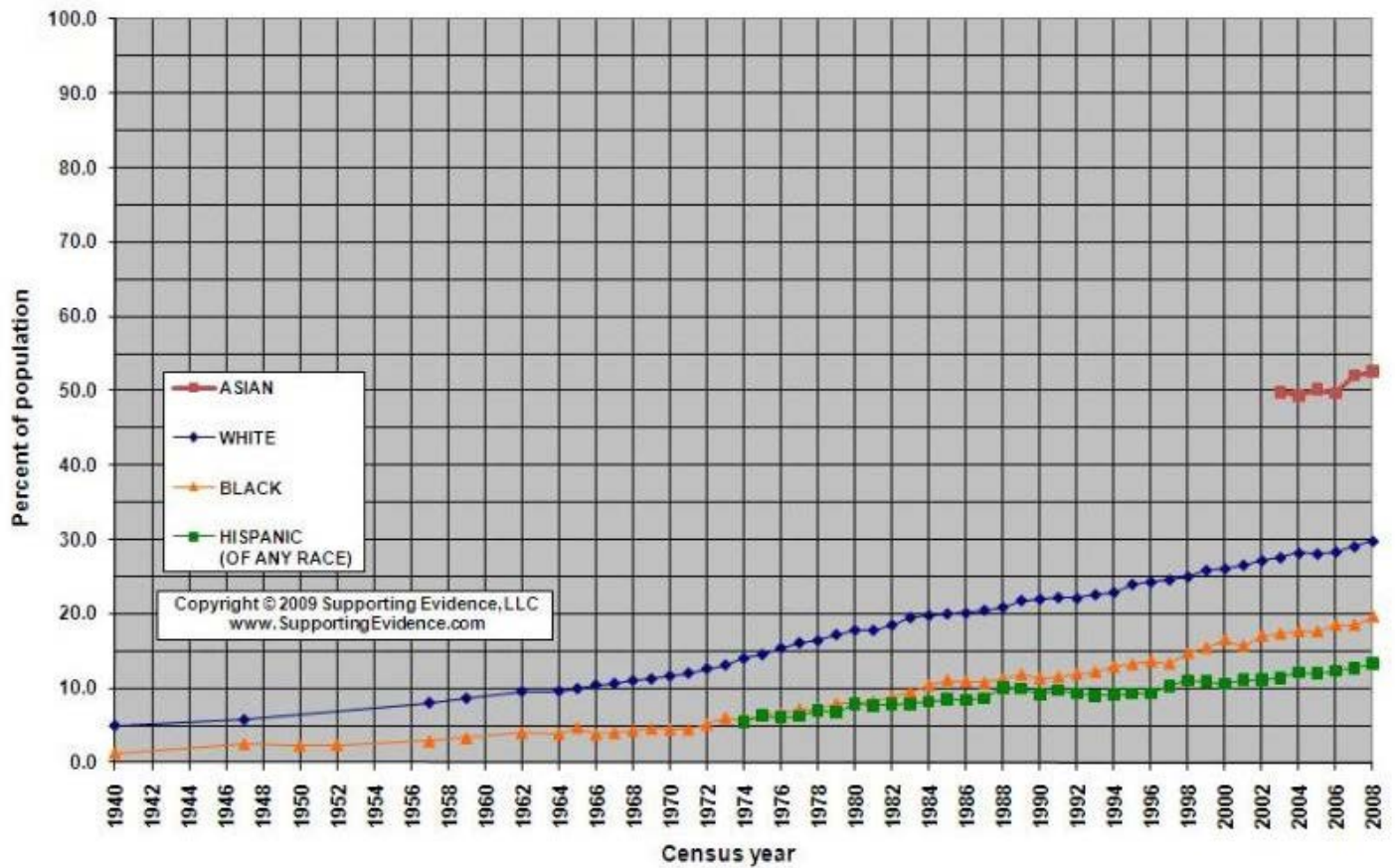
We have been down this road before in some ways. Prior to WWII, college graduates were less than 10% of the population, which was majority white. Economic incentives changed in the post-war boom, and government policy in the form of the GI bill brought many more men into colleges. Later, social changes did the same for young women. Colleges and universities responded to these changes in demand by making more places available for new students and accommodating them with programs designed to meet their needs and backgrounds. The result was that college graduates now make up about 30% of the adult population, and college enrollment of students just out of high school is now at 70%. Demography was not destiny during the post-war boom. A few tables show the extent of the changes:

Overall enrollment has risen steadily:

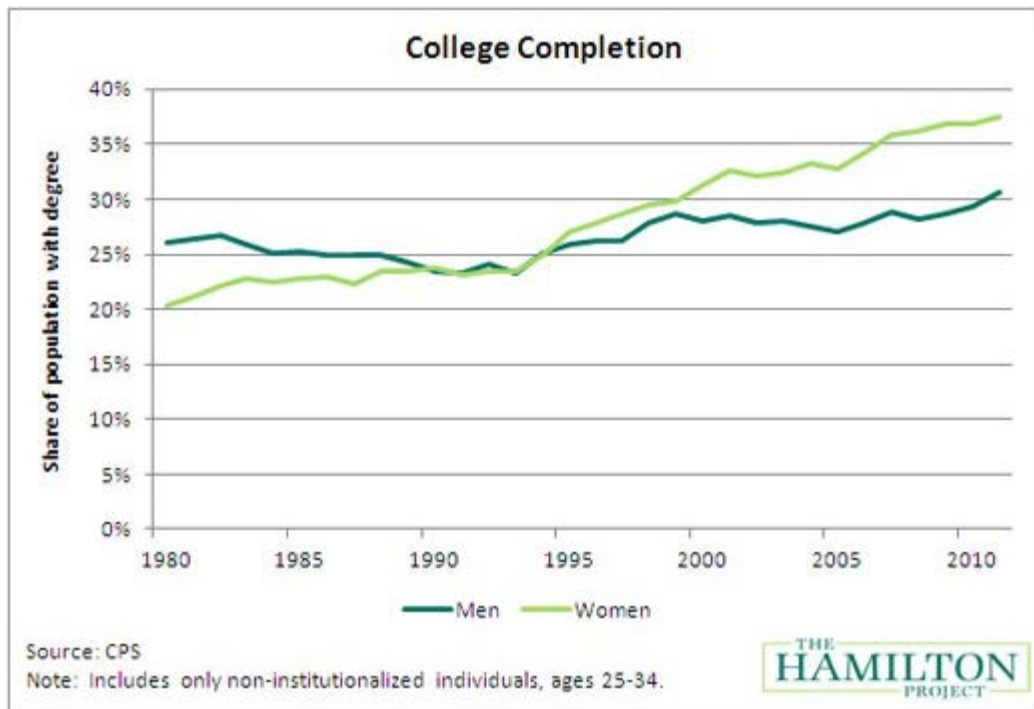


Post WWII completion rates have risen for all groups, though non-Asian minorities lag the Caucasian majority:

Percent of U.S. 25 or More Year-olds with 4 or More Years of College



Women have responded strongly to new opportunities, which is, in part, why nearly 60% of undergraduates are women these days:



There is no reason to think that exactly the same kind of forces might not combine to respond to the growing number of students of color and eventually bring their college enrollment and completion rates to the same levels, or even beyond, those we currently see among traditional majority students. It will not be simple as the minority population does not have the same preparation or economic resources their Caucasian counterparts did when they moved in large numbers into colleges, but it is certainly not impossible.

This is one place where our economic destiny will be determined by the conscious choices of parents and students rather than mere demography, and the actions of colleges and governments will be an important determinant in that future.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | April 6th, 2015 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).