

The Demographic IMPERATIVE

BY STEPHEN M. JORDAN

TAKEAWAYS

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SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS, DRAMATICALLY changing student bodies, and diminishing state funds now are dictating new national priorities for higher education. It's time for governing boards and their institution's administrators to wake up, have a strong cup of reality, and face these challenges head on. Many boards and institutional leaders have received presentations on projected



national demographic changes over the past few decades, but given the enrollment and graduation statistics we see today, it is clear that some have not heard the alarm bells—and that much more must be done to meet the needs of the low-income and minority students who will make up a growing part of the college-age population in the near future.

Nationally, the number of high-school graduates peaked at 3 million last year, according to the seventh edition of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's "Knocking at the College Door" report. WICHE projects a gradual drop of 0.7 percent in high-school graduates by 2014 with a high concentration of the decline in the Northeast, which is facing an average drop of one percent per year.

At the same time, however, the number of low-income students and students of color in high school—whom higher education historically has not served well—is increasing. Over the next decade, this population will represent half of high-school enrollments nationally. Complicating the picture is that fact that this change is highly variable and distinctly regional, with the largest growth in the rate of high-school graduates occurring in the West and South and enrollments shrinking in the Northeast and Midwest.

As a result of these trends, increased competition among colleges and universities for traditional-age students will intensify, but more importantly, the need to attract and retain nontraditional students will increase dramatically. According to America.gov, over 6.1 million non-traditional college students (age 25 or older) were enrolled in U.S. colleges in 2003, composing about 37 percent of all college students. In the midst of the current recession, this will remain an especially important market as unemployed workers go back to college to reinvent themselves.

Colorado as a Case Study

At Metropolitan State College of Denver, where I am president, we are focusing on Colorado's changing demographics. Recent census data show that Latinos now make up the youngest and fastest-

growing segment of the state's population and that nearly one in five Coloradans is Latino. While Colorado's total population increased by 30 percent between 1990 and 2000, the growth rate of the Latino population was 75 percent during the same period. In Denver, half of all births are now Latino, according to 2004 data from the Piton Foundation. It is projected that by 2017, the number of Latino high-school graduates in Colorado will almost double, to nearly 19,000 annually.

Yet, nationally, Colorado is ranked 35th in sending low-income students to college and 48th in sending minority-group students. These contrasting trends, coupled with the state's shifting demographics, are just one example of why it is imperative that both in Colorado and across the country, higher-education leaders, lawmakers, and policy analysts grapple seriously with the changes these demographic realities require.

Increasing Access

One important implication of these changing demographics is the need to address ways to make college more accessible, particularly in areas of the country that will experience growth in the college-age population and especially among groups not well-served in the past. Attending college is one of the most critical decisions students and their families will ever make. We need to not only look at methods to increase financial aid but also to take a bird's-eye view and develop new approaches that will make it possible for students from all backgrounds to pursue higher education and be successful.

As the United States moves toward becoming a "minority-majority" country, what more can—and should—college presidents and governing boards do to provide low-income students and students of color with a pipeline to high-quality education? Ongoing discourse about shifting demographics locally and nationally must be built into institutions' strategic planning and budgeting. It is also imperative that we educate the public about these necessary changes and the implications they will have on our constituents' economic future if not addressed. Trustees can work with their institution's presi-

dent and do this through public forums, such as newspaper editorial boards. For example, our board chair and I attended a *Rocky Mountain News* editorial board meeting with the message that if Colorado could graduate and employ students of color at the same rate as it does other students, total personal income in the state would be nearly \$3.7 billion higher.

To begin, governing boards must ask themselves five tough questions.

Question 1: *Do you have an understanding of your institution's student demographics, as well as those of your surrounding community?*

The faces of the American college population will continue to change. By 2020, demographers anticipate students of color will make up 46 percent of the nation's total college student population.

My institution, Metro State, has the second-largest undergraduate population in Colorado, with 25 percent of its enrollment being students of color—more than the University of Colorado-Boulder and Colorado State University, the state's two flagship institutions, combined. To build on this success and in recognition of the growing Latino population locally, our board of trustees charged me with leading Metro State to officially become a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). As defined by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, this means that Latinos must make up at least 25 percent of our enrollment and at least 50 percent of those students must be classified as "low income." In Denver, Latinos make up 32 percent of the population, and at Metro State, Latinos make up 13 percent of student enrollment. For the last six years, we have graduated more Latinos than any other ethnic group.

Thus Metro State is already on the right course. If our enrollment of Latinos and other ethnic groups continues to grow at its current rate, we will reach HSI status within the next decade. Being designated an HSI qualifies an institution of higher education to apply for federal HSI grants that support all students at the institution. For example, \$95 million in core support was awarded to HSI institutions across the country in 2007.

To help accomplish our goal, we created a 60-member HSI task force empowered to look at Colorado's shifting demographics and make recommendations for this initiative. Already, members have toured other HSIs in California, Texas, and Illinois; become thoroughly engaged in the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities; and held several town meetings with the Latino community.

The task force has helped spearhead a significant change in Colorado by working with Denver's Latino community to help pass a state law concerning eligibility for in-state tuition rates. The measure provides a statutory definition that eliminates parents' residency status as the basis for in-state tuition rates for students who are U.S. citizens, under the age of 23, and attended the final three years at a Colorado high school before receiving their diploma.

Last spring, task force members presented a plan with 55 recommendations to the board of trustees.

The top 17 recommendations, with student retention-related initiatives first, received priority funding in this academic year's budget.

Question 2: *Is there a disparity in the performance of students of color? If so, ask why.* According to the National Governors Association, of young adults who enroll in college, Hispanic and black students are only half as likely to earn a college degree as white students. Further, graduation by the age of 24 is seven times more likely for high-income students than it is for low-income students.

At Metro State we held a mirror up to ourselves as an institution and asked: Are we doing all we can to further true opportunity and student success across all ethnic groups? We found the answer to be

"No," and we're now working to improve our record.

Four years ago, Metro State participated in a national equity-scorecard study with WICHE, which monitored equity for historically underrepresented students in four areas: access, retention, institutional receptivity, and academic excellence.

The results—the reflections in our mirror—indicated that:

- These students are more likely to need remedial courses, to earn poor grades, and to fail to graduate. This is true regardless of their high-school grades.

- There is a lack of continuous advising and support from Metro State while students are taking remedial courses at community colleges.

- This creates a "trap-door" effect for many of these students, as Metro State admits them but then allows most of their initial education to occur at community

colleges. Colorado is one of 10 states where four-year institutions do not receive state funding for remedial instruction. As a result, often students were enrolled at Metro State, but didn't take an actual course at the college until their sophomore year.

Consequently, we are now strengthening and expanding our student services and have laid out several new initiatives, such as rejuvenating partnerships with feeder community colleges.

It is critical that these students have access to full-time faculty members of the same ethnic background to serve as peer mentors, helping students navigate the transition from high school to college.

Question 3: *To address shifting demographics, are you (1) providing support services that consider your students' different learning styles, (2) assessing the ethnic distribution of faculty*

members, and (3) adjusting your admissions standards?

These implications of changing demographics go beyond the role and responsibility of admissions directors. Educators and board members must

better understand the many different cultures and characteristics of students of color. Today's students did not all receive a quality K-12 education, encouragement from their family and peers, and the necessary college preparation. Boards and presidents must look for strategies to provide not only access to these new groups of students, who are generally less prepared and supported than their predecessors, but also to provide the support needed to enable greater numbers to actually graduate.

Some institutions might increase their enrollments of previously under-served groups by targeting students of color or non-traditionally aged students—who are often targeted by higher-education institutions when traditional populations decline. This may be done by an institution lowering its admissions requirements to accommodate the shifting demographics in its region, even though this may lead to students who are not as academically prepared. Key strategies are then needed to provide support services and address the academic deficiencies. Metro State is a modified open-enrollment institution, meaning we admit all students over the age of 20. Currently, we lose 36 percent of our freshman class in the first year, compared to a national average of approximately 25 percent.

Our trustees have now challenged the administration to reduce our freshman drop-out rate by 10 percent over the next five years. We've launched several initiatives to meet this challenge, including the development and implementation of a first-year "success program." Key components of the program include learning communities with a strong focus on paired courses—two courses for which students must co-register—as well as peer mentoring, supplemental instruction, and civic

engagement. Our long-term goal is for all freshmen to take a first-year seminar that will provide valuable learning experiences and engage them more deeply in the academic community as a means of improving retention and access patterns.

National studies show that, as our experience indicates, too many low-income students and students of color arrive at college with severe academic deficiencies, particularly in writing, mathematics, and science. Further, many students from economically challenged backgrounds do not have family members who attended college or other academic role models. It is critical that these students have access

to full-time faculty members of the same ethnic background to serve as peer mentors, helping students navigate the transition from high school to college.

This suggests the need for each governing board to assure that its administration is actively recruiting faculty members of color. At Metro State, we have made great strides in this area. Since 2004, we have added nearly 200 full-time, tenure-track faculty members, with 51 being faculty of color. Over the next seven years, we will add an additional 420 tenure-track faculty members, with a goal of 25 percent of them being

faculty of color. Statistics show a clear correlation between student retention and the number of full-time faculty members, as opposed to having affiliate faculty teaching lower-division classes.

Difficult decisions must be made concerning campus facilities, whether it's new buildings, expansions, or simply doing more with current capacity. Our trustees recently approved a plan for a new building on our campus, which will serve primarily as a one-stop shop for students; all enrollment and other student services will be housed on the first and second floors.

Question 4: *Are you collaborating with your surrounding communities and developing opportunities for students and faculty members to work together in solving community problems?*

Institutions of higher education are being held accountable for providing students with a quality education, as well as increasing their responsiveness to the needs of communities as demographics change. This has led many colleges and universities to infuse civic engagement into their classes. Governing boards must work with their college's administration to expand students' civic involvement and more thoroughly engage them in their surrounding communities. We must go beyond the classroom experience and develop opportunities to use what's learned in the classroom outside in the community.

When I arrived at Metro State, I announced a goal for the college to become an urban land-grant institution, to help prepare students for the challenges of working in an urban setting once they graduate. Providing meaningful opportunities for civic engagement is a critical way to build partnerships with the community, provide service, and develop opportunities for deeper learning and students' growth.

We created a task force charged with clarifying Metro State's ties to the Denver metropolitan community, particularly with respect to service and outreach activities. It also is charged with developing the programmatic framework for Metro State's civic engagement with the city of Denver. The task force will identify critical issues, needs, and opportunities that should be addressed or improved upon within the college's mission to enhance the public good.

Engagement may take many forms, but it should include helping address some of the outstanding challenges faced by communities. We must anticipate future needs and help address them as higher-education institutions. Many staff and faculty members at Metro State have helped build a strong foundation of award-winning community programs focused on improving K-16 education for all students of color. One example is

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the Urban Teaching Partnership, which was founded with a \$9.5 million federal Department of Education Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) grant. This program works to better prepare and retain secondary-education teachers for urban schools and thereby boost student achievement.

Question 5: *Are you aligning with community colleges?*

Whether you've decided to ramp up your efforts in recruiting non-traditional or students of color, partnerships with community colleges are key to attracting transfer students from both of these demographic segments. National studies show that both students of color and non-traditional aged students are more likely to choose a two-year community college as their point of entry into higher education.

Currently, among all of the nation's undergraduate students, 47 percent of African American and Asian students, 55 percent of Latino students, and 57 percent of Native American students are enrolled in community colleges, according to the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development. Thus, partnerships between two- and four-year institutions to offer degree programs are one option for helping increase degree attainment among students of color. Metro State, for example, has formalized a 2+2 plan with the Colorado Community College System, allowing community-college students to earn an associate's degree and then complete a Metro State bachelor's degree in selected programs, while physically remaining at their community college. We now offer five majors in two urban community colleges that serve large populations of Latino and African-American students in the greater metro Denver area. This partnership was an historic event for Colorado higher education. It has given the participating institutions a chance to expand upon the important work we're already doing: educating—and graduating—students of color in Colorado. My counterpart, Linda Bowman, president of the Community College of Aurora, said of the program, "This is a watershed moment for higher education."

The popularity of our 2+2 plan has resonated throughout Colorado's community-college system, and we now have three additional community colleges requesting to be a part of the program.

A Civic Obligation and Demographic Imperative

The five questions I've outlined will help governing boards begin the process of better aligning their institutions with the shifting demographics. Higher education must continue to evolve and respond to the ever-changing needs of the new student body, which will be less affluent, less white, and perhaps more mature. It is not only a civic obligation, but also an economic imperative that we educate low-income students and students of color. Otherwise, this fast-growing segment of the population will be qualified only for low-wage jobs when today's educated baby boomers retire, as they already are doing in record numbers.

Nearly all higher-education institutions will see changes in their student populations over the next decade. The only exception to this reality might be top-tier, flagship institutions that already have more highly qualified applicants than available space. To address these national shifting demographics, governing boards must have ongoing dialogues with their institutions, legislators, and state higher-education departments and commissions to develop a shared vision. These critical dialogues must take place soon if they have not already begun. Designating resources to address these shifting demographics will bolster economic well being, not only for institutions, but also for surrounding communities, regions, and the nation as the United States moves toward becoming a "minority-majority" country. ■

AUTHOR: Stephen M. Jordan is president of Metropolitan State College of Denver.

EMAIL: smjordan@mscd.edu

SHIP LINKS: E. Gordon Gee, "An Investment in Student Diversity," March/April 2005.

Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., "Can Increasing Student Diversity Help Raise A College or University's Academic Standards?" January/February 2005.