



MLDC Research Areas

- Definition of Diversity
- Legal Implications
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This issue paper aims to aid in the deliberations of the MLDC. It does not contain the recommendations of the MLDC.

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Requirements and the Demographic Profile of the Eligible Population

Differences in Racial/Ethnic and Gender-Specific Educational Attainment Trends

Abstract

As population trends increase the demographic diversity of the pool of young adults from which the Services recruit, demographic differences in educational attainment, particularly college completion, increasingly drive a wedge between the eligible population and the total population. This issue paper addresses the way demographic differences in educational attainment affect the recruiting-age population—and, thus, the pipeline for future military leaders—and the factors that underlie these educational differences. It shows that the growing share of minorities in the population makes attaining population representation in the Services a moving target and that persistent lags in educational attainment by Hispanics and blacks make the target even more elusive. Furthermore, different patterns of economic and family characteristics underlie these demographic differences in educational attainment, making it hard for the Services to devise ways to remedy them.

In the MLDC issue paper “How Requirements Shape the Demographic Profile of the Eligible Population,” we showed that many of the Services’ eligibility requirements cause the demographic mix of the eligible population to differ from that of the U.S. population. In particular, we showed that education requirements decrease eligibility rates for Hispanics and blacks.

As population trends¹ increase the demographic diversity of the pool of young adults from which the Services recruit, demographic differences in educational attainment, particularly college completion,

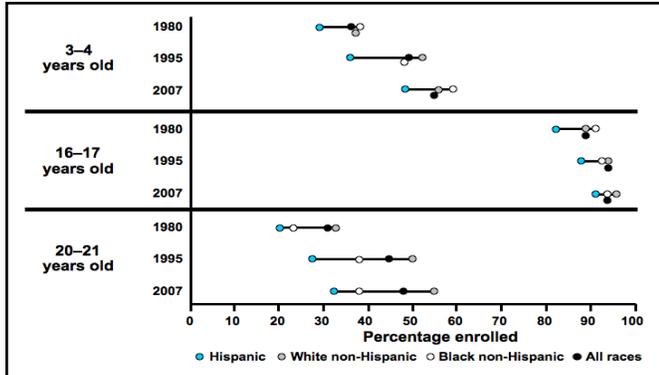
increasingly drive a wedge between the eligible population and the total population. This issue paper addresses the way demographic differences in educational attainment affect the recruiting-age population—and, thus, the pipeline for future military leaders—and the factors that underlie these educational differences.

How Educational Attainment Differs by Race and Hispanic Origin

Differences in educational enrollment and attainment have obvious implications for the demographic composition of the pool of new recruits, particularly for officers. In 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 28 percent of the population age 25 and older had at least a bachelor’s degree—a record high. However, the immigration of large numbers of Hispanics and smaller numbers of Asians has changed the racial/ethnic profile of the college-educated population, particularly in the group ages 25–29, which accounts for many new military officers.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of enrollment (both full- and part-time) at key school ages over the past 25 years for Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks compared with non-Hispanic whites.² (Asians are not included in this figure because, until recent years, their numbers were too small, given the size of the survey sample.) Although enrollment rates have risen for all three populations (as shown by the shift of the lines to the right in all three age groupings over time), differences by race and ethnicity persist, and Hispanics show the lowest level of educational attainment across populations in all years. For example, at ages 16–17, ages at which youth typically attend high school, enrollment rates continue to be similar for blacks and whites but lower for Hispanics.

Figure 1. Enrollment During Key School Ages over the Past 25 Years, by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman, 2009, Table 6.

At ages 20–21, when Americans tend to go to college, blacks are less likely than whites to be enrolled, and Hispanics continue to lag behind blacks.

We next narrow our focus to full-time enrollment, given its association with superior educational attainment. Table 1 presents full-time enrollment snapshots for civilian youth ages 15–19 and 20–24 in 1996 and 2006, highlighting enrollment at the level that is the norm for those ages—high school for the younger group and college for the older one.³ It looks at both sexes together and then separately. We shade the “All races” category, which becomes the average we use in comparing full-time enrollment across race/ethnicity groups.

Like enrollment in general, full-time enrollment increased between 1996 and 2006 for almost all demographic groups. However, at ages 15–19, Hispanic males were least likely and Asian women were most likely to be enrolled in high school

full-time. Black women also showed below-average full-time enrollment compared with other demographic groups.

At ages 20–24, Asian women were most likely to be full-time college students, and Hispanic men were least likely. In general, Asians and white non-Hispanics showed above-average levels of full-time college enrollment, and Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks had below-average levels. Furthermore, in each race/ethnicity group, women were more likely than men to be full-time college students.

Since many enrollees do not complete their educational programs, it is also important to examine demographic differences at the highest level of educational attainment. Figure 2 addresses this issue. The dotted lines in the figure separate the population benchmark shares for whites, blacks, and Hispanics from their levels of educational attainment. Thus, whites represent almost 60 percent of the population ages 20–24, but only about 57 percent of whites report high school as their highest level of educational attainment, which signals a greater investment in higher education. As Figure 2 shows, compared with their population benchmark, blacks and Hispanics in their early twenties were disproportionately likely to report high-school completion as their highest level of educational attainment in 2005, and whites were disproportionately likely to report having received a bachelor’s degree.

In their late twenties, people who have continued their education are likely to report a professional degree as their highest level of education. This is why the share of whites who list a bachelor’s degree as their highest level completed declines. However, the share of Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks who say a bachelor’s degree is their highest level completed increases, even allowing for those who now report a professional degree. This may indicate that for those Hispanics and blacks who eventually get a bachelor’s degree, it

Table 1. Full-Time Educational Enrollment of Two Age Groups over Two Periods, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

	All Races	White Non-Hispanic	Black Non-Hispanic	Asian/PI Non-Hispanic	Other Non-Hispanic	Hispanic
Both Sexes, Ages 15–19						
High school, FT, 1996	47.9	47.9	50.1	52.9	43.8	44.4
High school, FT, 2006	50.8	51.6	50.0	52.1	53.1	48.1
Both Sexes, Ages 20–24						
College, FT, 1996	25.7	27.7	23.4	42.5	20.7	13.7
College, FT, 2006	29.0	33.0	25.3	45.6	23.4	14.3
Men, Ages 15–19						
High school, FT, 1996	50.0	49.9	52.5	60.5	47.5	45.1
High school, FT, 2006	51.9	52.9	52.2	51.7	55.9	47.5
Men, Ages 20–24						
College, FT, 1996	25.1	27.3	22.4	40.8	20.2	13.7
College, FT, 2006	27.0	31.7	21.7	43.0	21.2	12.1
Women, Ages 15–19						
High school, FT, 1996	45.7	45.7	47.7	45.8	40.9	43.7
High school, FT, 2006	49.7	50.1	47.9	52.5	50.5	48.7
Women, Ages 20–24						
College, FT, 1996	26.2	28.2	24.3	44.1	21.2	13.7
College, FT, 2006	30.9	34.2	28.7	48.3	25.5	16.7

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996, 2006.

NOTE: PI stands for Pacific Islanders; FT stands for full time.

takes longer to amass the resources to enroll in college at the usual ages.⁴

Turning to gender differences, Figure 3, structured in much the same way as Figure 2, shows that, in their early twenties, men are decidedly more likely than women to report that their education stopped with high-school completion. This difference narrows for those ages 25–29, and similar numbers of both men and women in this age group reported attainment beyond the bachelor’s degree.

Trends in postgraduate degrees demonstrate how immigration either counters or accelerates demographic differences in educational attainment. Table 2 breaks out the population by race/ethnicity group for the 25–29 age group for two periods: 1996 and 2006. In each case, we look at the total population across all race/ethnicity groups in the age group (“All races”) and then at the proportion of that total population for each of the individual race/ethnicity groups.

For example, the total population for the 15–29 age group in 1996 was 19,461,519, of which 68 percent (or 13,306,801) were non-Hispanic whites. Below the population row, we show the same relationship for the college-educated population, breaking that population out by those who received a bachelor’s degree and those who received an advanced degree. We shade the percentages in each racial/ethnic group to help them stand out. For example, although non-Hispanic whites accounted for 68 percent of the 25–29 age group in 1996, they accounted for 80 percent of the college-educated population, and 78 percent of the college-educated population had an advanced degree. In 2006, those totals were 59, 72, and 70 percent, respectively.

The table shows that the number of Hispanics ages 25–29 who attained advanced degrees almost doubled over the decade examined in the table. However, this improvement in no way kept pace with the increase in Hispanics’ share of the population at that age. To simplify, the influx of Hispanic immigrants—which can be seen in the swelling of that age group over its size a decade earlier (4,087,734 Hispanics ages 25–29 in 2006 compared with 2,433,250 ages

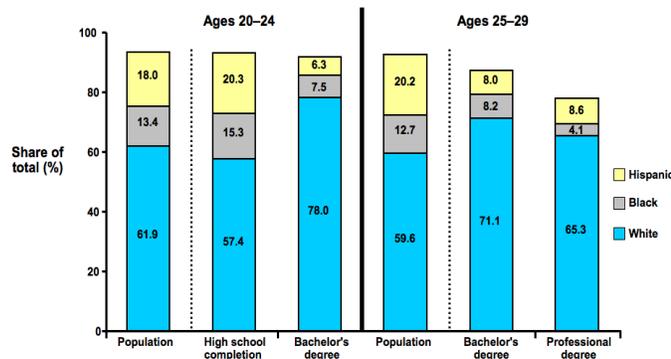
15–19 in 1996)—vastly increased the number of Hispanics without a college education. In contrast, the Asian population this age also grew due to immigration (1,132,869 Asians ages 25–29 in 2006 compared with 701,652 ages 15–19 in 1996), but, for this group, the bulk of the population growth took place among degree holders, whether immigrant or native born. Thus, the composition of population growth has made a population-representation goal a moving target *despite* greater numbers of Hispanic and black college graduates.

Factors Influencing Educational Attainment

There is a general consensus among researchers that barriers to education for Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks, who are disproportionately poor, arise at early ages and worsen as education progresses. At the college level, individuals and their families have to finance tuition and other costs, and needing to earn or borrow the requisite funds is likely to delay or discourage both enrollment and completion. Other factors identified relate either directly to low income, such as having only one parent, or indirectly to low income, such as having parents who are relatively less educated (Cooper, 2003).

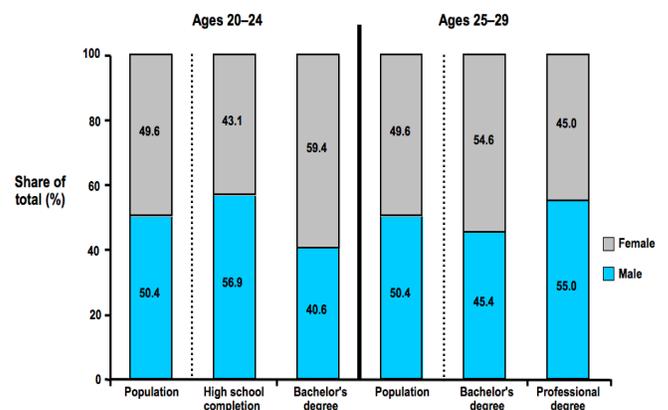
Studying demographic differences in education patterns, Cooper (2003)⁵ observes little difference by race and ethnicity among those who follow the following traditional path toward educational attainment: “college enrollment soon after high school rather than many years later, entry into four-year colleges rather than two-year colleges, attendance full-time rather than part-time, continual rather than intermittent enrollment, and persistence through the four-year college curriculum” (p. 870). This pattern is characteristic for all races and Hispanic origin at upper-income levels, a finding from Department of Education longitudinal studies cited by Cooper.⁶ However, a smaller share of blacks and Hispanics come from upper-income families. Thus, blacks and Hispanics are less likely to follow this traditional education trajectory.

Figure 2. The Highest Level of Educational Attainment by Two Age Groups, by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman, 2006.

Figure 3. Educational Attainment by Gender



SOURCE: Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman, 2006.

For instance, a recent study by the Education Trust (2009) found that 45 percent of low-income and underrepresented minority students entering public four-year colleges as freshmen in 1999 had received bachelor's degrees six years later at the colleges studied, compared with 57 percent of other students.

In addition to family income, Cooper (2003) found that other predictors of successful education trajectories are whether English is spoken in the home, the level of the parents' education, and whether the household contains two parents. Again, smaller shares of young Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks have these background characteristics.

Cooper (2003) also found that Asians are more likely than other demographic groups to follow a successful education trajectory, even at lower levels of family income. Per capita, the percentage of Asian women who obtain bachelor's degrees is a third higher than it is for white women; the rate for Asian men is half again as high as it is for white men. Parental levels of education and parental expectations in particular are usually cited to explain this difference.

In thinking about ways to increase minority representation in the military, it is easier to think of strategies to address the financial and temporal barriers to attaining higher education than to retrospectively change parenting. Such strategies include ways to rectify income deficits, such as providing assistance with tuition and living expenses, or ways to rectify time deficits, such as urging educational institutions to provide childcare for students with children and flexible hours for those who must work.

Johnson and Rochkind (2009) surveyed young adults who dropped out of college before completion and found that "[m]ore than half of those who left before completing a degree or a certificate said that the 'need to work and make money' while attending classes is the major reason they left. Balancing work and school was an even bigger barrier than finding money for tuition" (p. 4). Indeed, when interviewed, the vast majority of young students who leave college identify the need for options to deal with time deficits. Such options as more evening classes or childcare would help them mitigate the challenge of working and going to school at the same time.

Conclusion

The growing share of minorities in the population makes attaining population representation in the Services a moving target, and persistent lags in educational attainment by Hispanics and blacks make the target even more elusive. Different patterns of economic and family characteristics underlie these demographic differences in educational attainment, making it hard for the Services to devise ways to remedy them.

Table 2. The Racial/Ethnic Distribution of the College-Educated Civilian Population, Ages 25–29, 1996 and 2006

	All Races	White Non-Hispanic		Black Non-Hispanic		Asian/PI Non-Hispanic		Hispanic	
Population ages 25–29 in 1996	19,461,519	13,306,801	68%	2,544,536	13%	875,314	4%	2,611,672	13%
College-educated	5,280,400	4,202,196	80%	371,836	7%	436,541	8%	262,003	5%
<i>Bachelor's degree</i>	4,317,745	3,450,416	80%	325,602	8%	306,858	7%	229,202	5%
<i>Advanced degree</i>	962,655	751,780	78%	46,234	5%	129,683	13%	32,801	3%
Population ages 25–29 in 2006	20,137,799	11,976,321	59%	2,563,611	13%	1,132,869	6%	4,087,734	20%
College-educated	5,719,031	4,109,243	72%	479,826	8%	673,039	12%	387,465	7%
<i>Bachelor's degree</i>	4,429,475	3,207,873	72%	397,505	9%	446,975	10%	326,303	7%
<i>Advanced degree</i>	1,289,556	901,370	70%	82,321	6%	226,064	18%	61,162	5%

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996, 2006.

NOTE: PI stands for Pacific Islanders. Percentages do not total 100 percent because small groups are omitted.

Notes

¹Demographic differences in both fertility and immigration combine to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the nation's population. Diversity is greatest at younger ages because of racial/ethnic differences in childbearing and because immigrants tend to arrive as young adults and have their children after they arrive.

²Note that "where enrolled" (such as high school, college) is not specified because our interest here is in demographic differences in simple participation rather than in the pattern of participation. Also note that enrollment may be full-time or part-time.

³That is, some in the younger group will have started college, and many in the older one will have finished it and gone on to other pursuits.

⁴See Association of American Medical Colleges (2005) for a comprehensive comparison by gender and race/Hispanic origin for an array of factors related to gaining the qualifications required for medical school, generally considered to be quite demanding.

⁵Cooper's analysis is based on data from the Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, the Census Bureau, and the Association of American Medical Colleges (Cooper, 2003, p. 2).

⁶By following the same people over many years, longitudinal surveys enable researchers to distinguish the relative impact of different factors.

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