

# Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY

Public Policy Analysis of Opportunity for Postsecondary Education

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*The inconvenient truth ...*

## Family Income and Educational Attainment 1970 to 2010

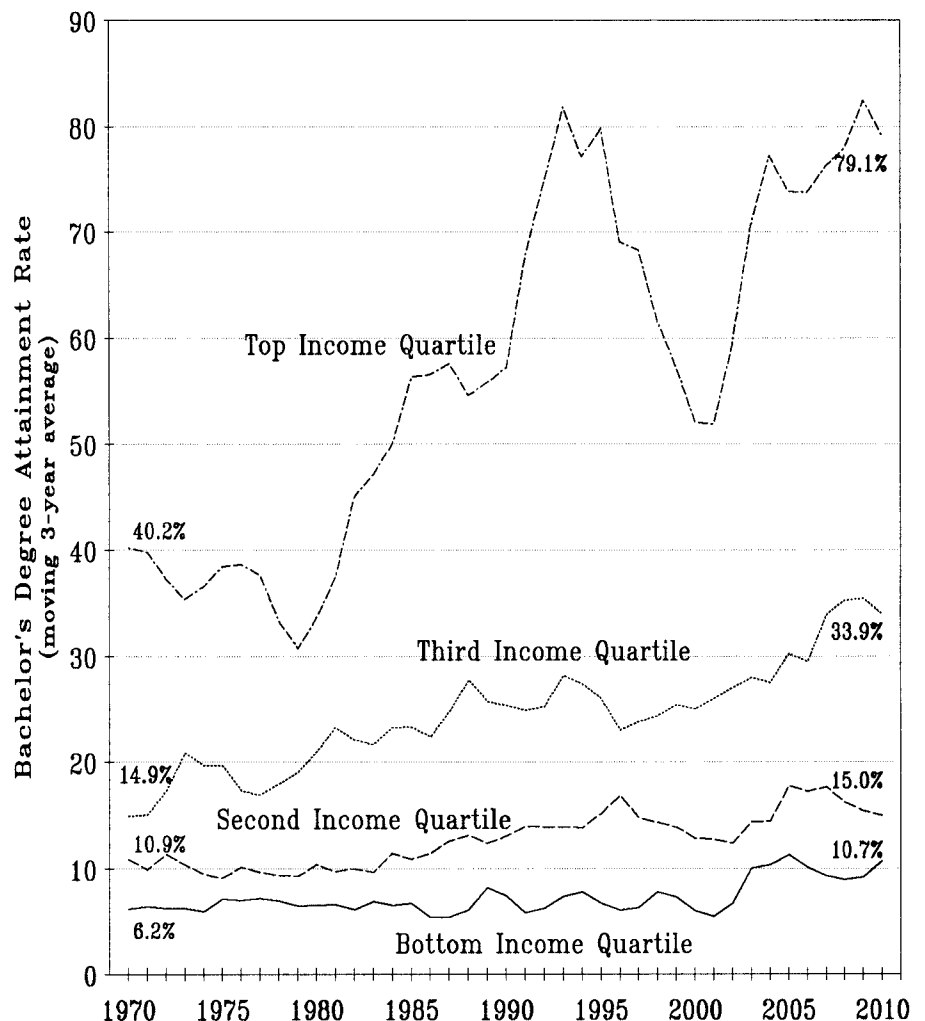
For the last three decades opportunity for higher education has been redistributed across levels of family income in the United States--away from students from low income families and toward students from affluent families. Nearly all federal, state and institutional efforts to expand higher education participation and attainment have gone to students who were *born* into the top half of the family income distribution--above about \$61,600 per year. Almost none of the new efforts to expand opportunity have been directed toward students who were *born* into the bottom half of family income.

This redistribution has been deliberate, purposeful, pervasive and persistent for more than 30 years.

- This redistribution has been phenomenally successful for students who were *born* into affluent families.
- This redistribution has been brutally destructive for students who were *born* into families with low incomes.

Despite remarkable absolute and relative gains in high school graduation rates and college continuation rates for students *born* into low income families, they have hit a wall when they reach higher education. Despite record high postsecondary participation rates, their bachelor's degree completion rates have barely budged in 40 years. These students have tried. But

Estimated Baccalaureate Degree Attainment  
by Age 24 by Family Income Quartile  
1970 to 2010



federal, state and institutional policies, programs and resources have failed them.

These students *born* into low income families have been betrayed. They were and continue to be promised that if they stay in school and work hard

they too could go to college and earn the higher education others from affluent families have always had ready access to. While these students from low income families have made stunning progress preparing for college, at the same time the walls denying them higher education access, choice, persistence and attainment have been building also. The term "double-cross" is inadequate because it implies only the students from low income families have lost out. More accurate would be "sell-out" of the prosperity and social harmony of the entire country's future.

By choice neo-liberal public policy has decided to reward privilege inherited at birth for those lucky enough to be born into affluence.

- The federal government has moved away from need-based grants first toward educational loans and most recently to tax credits.
- States en masse have butchered their annual fiscal investment efforts in higher education, resulting in capacity constraints and exploding tuition charges to students. And few states have taken any serious responsibility for keeping college affordable for their own low income populations.
- Institutions--both public and private 4-year colleges and universities--have become self-absorbed and focused on status and revenues. This self-absorption results in focusing recruitment on students from affluent families, to the exclusion of students from low income families.

The cumulative effects of these policy choices have produced predictable, measurable and devastating consequences for students born into the bottom half of the family income distribution. Moreover, because this bottom half represents the growing share and eventual majority of our country's future citizens, voters, workers, taxpayers and parents, these

regressive policy choices have diminished our future.

- Higher education progress has been largely stagnant for two decades.
- Other countries are surging past the United States in higher educating the next generation of workers for what is now a global human capital economy.

To quote *A Nation at Risk* (1982):

*If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."*

This analysis uses data mainly compiled by the Census Bureau since 1970 to describe three eras of higher educational opportunity:

- **1970 to 1980.** This decade was the final ten years of progressive social policy making regarding opportunity for higher education in the United States. During this period the federal government establishes the Pell Grant program, states were still increasing their higher education investment efforts, and real tuition rates in public higher education were declining.
- **1980 to 2005.** This period was the first phase of the neo-liberal, regressive policy era. The federal government neglected the Pell Grant program in favor of student loans and tax credits. State investment effort in higher education collapsed, and was accompanied by enormous tuition

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## Mission Statement

This research letter is founded on two beliefs. First, sound public social policy requires accurate, current, independent, and focused information on the human condition. Second, education is essential to the development of human potential and resources for both private and public benefit. Therefore, the purpose of this research letter is to inform those who formulate, fund, and administer public policy and programs about the condition of and influences that affect postsecondary education opportunity for all Americans.

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charges to students. States began to move away from need-based grant aid to students to merit-based scholarships for affluent students.

- Both public and private 4-year colleges and universities initiated enrollment management practices designed to maximize institutional revenue and prestige (measured by ranking in U.S. News annual report).
- **2005 to present.** The Great Recession has made an awful situation for low income students very much worse in higher education. While low income student participation in postsecondary education is at record high levels, their enrollment in 4-year institutions is at record low levels. So too is their full-time enrollment.

### Data and Analysis

In 2010 30.1% of 24 year olds had completed a bachelor's degree. This was up from up from 29.8% in 2009, 29.6% in 2008 and 29.5% in 2007.

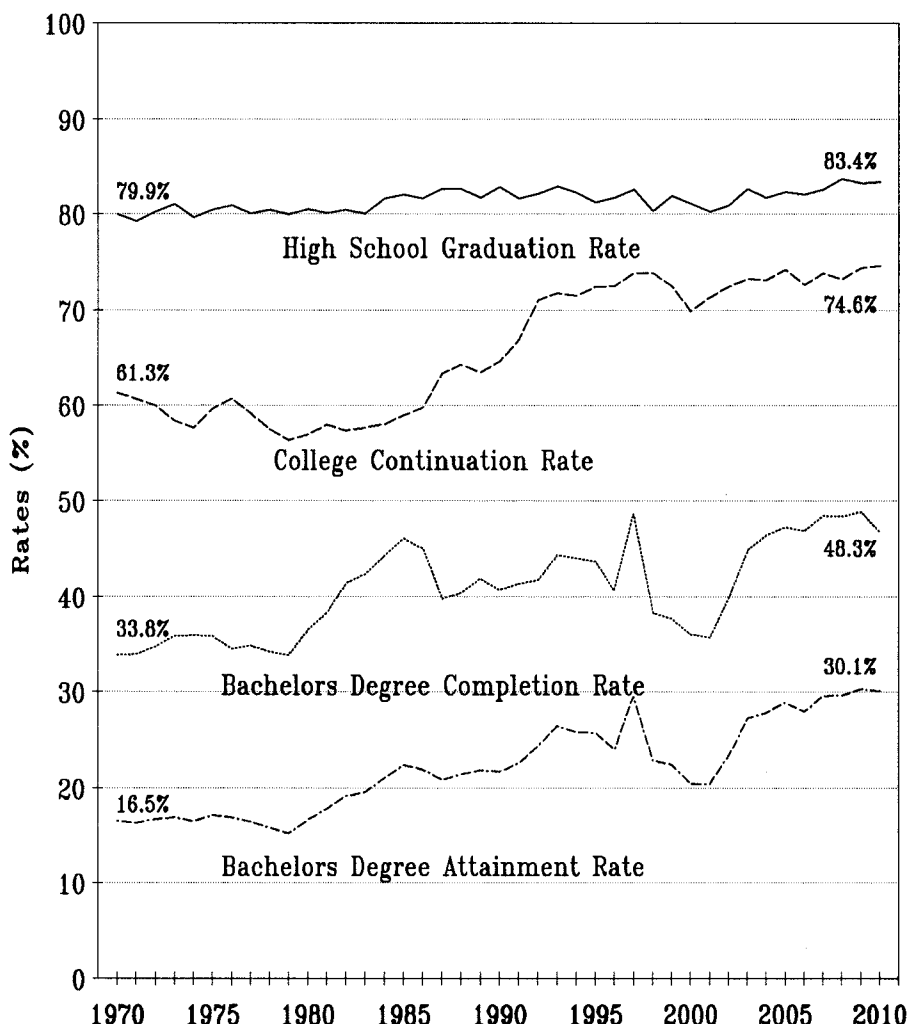
To earn a bachelor's degree one must pass three hurdles: graduate from high school, then continue enrollment in college, and then finally complete a bachelor's degree by age 24. The components of the 2010 bachelor's degree attainment rate were:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &83.4\% \text{ high school graduation rate} \\
 &\times 74.6\% \text{ college continuation rate} \\
 &\times 48.3\% \text{ bachelor's degree completion rate} \\
 &= 30.1\% \text{ bachelor's degree attainment rate}
 \end{aligned}$$

Of course the unique value of this analysis is that we calculate and report bachelor's degree attainment data by quartiles of family income. Here is where this analysis gets truly scary:

- **Bottom quartile.** The bottom quartile of family income ranged up to \$33,050 in 2010. From this quartile just 10.7% of students complete a bachelor's degree by

## Graduation, Continuation, Completion and Attainment Rates for All Dependent 18 to 24 Year Olds 1970 to 2010



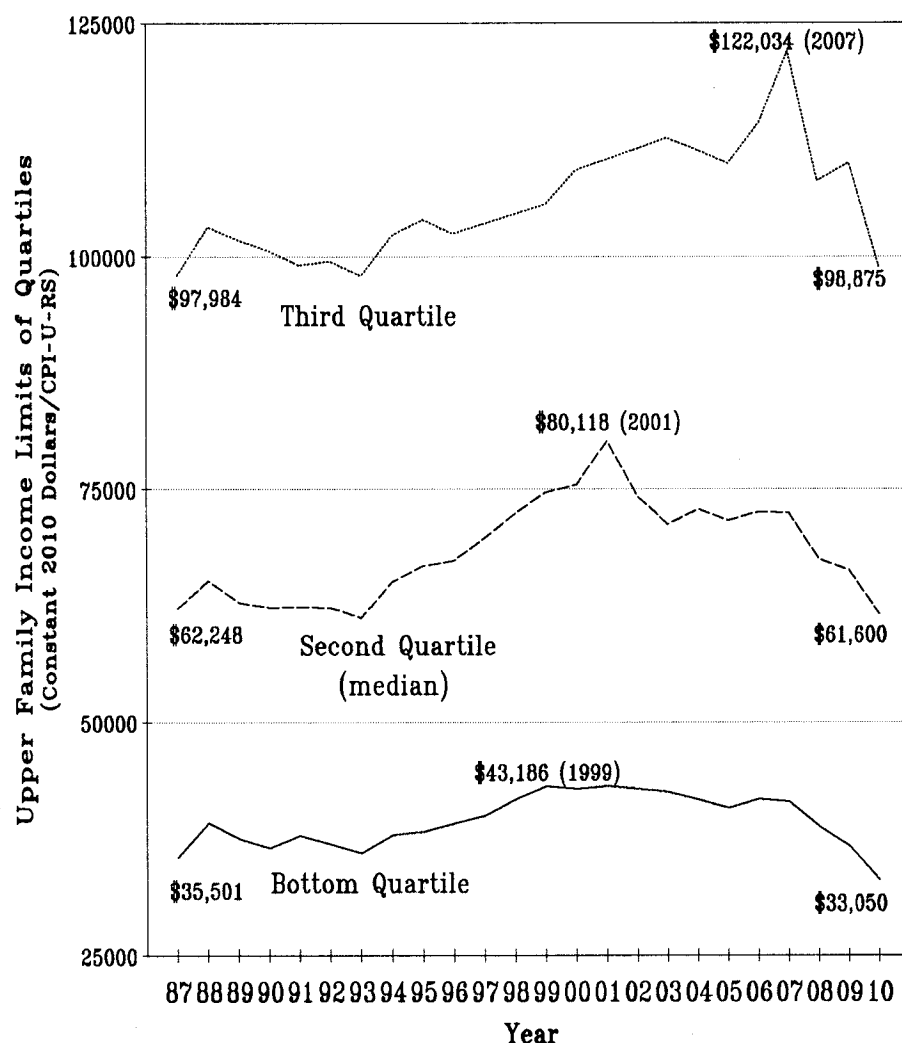
age 24.

- **Second quartile.** This quartile includes dependent 18 to 24 year olds whose family incomes ranged between \$33,050 and \$61,600 in 2010. From this quartile 15.0% of students completed a bachelor's degree by age 24.
- **Third quartile.** This family income quartile ranges from \$61,600 to \$98,875. In 2010 33.9% of the students completed a bachelor's degree by age 24.
- **Top quartile.** A quarter of the students come from families with incomes greater than \$98,875. In 2010 79.1% of these students had

completed a bachelor's degree by age 24.

We have calculated these data each year since 1970 when the raw input data were first reported by the Census Bureau. There are now 41 years of data in this series. Despite problems with changing definitions, deteriorating response rates to the Current Population Survey, missing higher income intervals for six years, and other problems, the end result produces results that track with other sources independent of these issues. We believe they fairly represent the movement of students from different

### Upper Family Income Limits for First, Second and Third Family Income Quartiles 1987 to 2010



family income backgrounds through the education pipeline on an annual basis.

Our calculations are based largely on data collected by the Census Bureau in the October Supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey.

**Table 14.** These data have been collected since 1970. The specific data used here came from Table 14 reported in the annual School Enrollment Report available from the Census Bureau's website at:

[www.census.gov/hhes/school/](http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/)

[index.html](#)

Table 14 (or its earlier versions) was published by the Census Bureau from 1970 through 2005, then dropped from the annual report. The chief of the Education and Social Stratification Division responsible for the survey reported that the basis for dropping this table was the deteriorating response rate to the CPS question on family income. In fact the response rate to the income question in the CPS had dropped from 95.5% in 1987 to 82.5% by 2005--the last year Table 14 was reported. He reported that survey

respondents had become reluctant to report their income information to the government survey taker.

We have produced Table 14 for the last five years ourselves from the CPS raw data file with programming help of Census Bureau staff. Indeed for the four years from 2005 to 2009 the response rates to the family income question have ranged between 77.5% (2007) and 80.9% (2008). We examined this issue from the perspective of non-response bias. When we compared the enrollment/non-enrollment distributions of those who reported family incomes to those who declines, the differences were very small, always much less than one percent. Thus we choose to continue to report our analysis based on the 80.4% that responded to the family income question in the 2009 CPS. For 2010 the Census Bureau has substantially changed the data file from which we recreate Table 14. Census appears to be imputing missing family income values. This appears to have magically increased the income question response rate to 100%.

**Family income.** Our analysis of the flow of students through high school and college is structured around family income, particularly family income quartiles. We calculate high school graduation rates, college continuation rates for those who graduate from high school, bachelor's degree completion rates by age 24 for those who enter college, and bachelor's degree attainment rates by age 24 for the population of 24 year olds.

Our family income data for dependent 18 to 24 year olds from Table 14 tells a profoundly troubling story about the course of family incomes during this last decade. In inflation adjusted 2010 dollars median family income (the upper limit for the second family income quartile) rose from \$62,248 in 1987, to a peak of \$80,118 in 2001. Since 2001 median family income has

declined steadily to \$61,600 by 2010, or about where it had been in 1995. This is a decline of \$18,518 or 23.1 percent in real median family income in just nine years.

We have extended this analysis to the bottom and top quartiles as well. In 2010 the upper limit of the bottom quartile of family income was \$33,050. In inflation adjusted dollars, this was down from \$43,186 in 1999. This was a decline of \$10,136 or 23.5 percent over the last 11 years.

The upper limit of the third quartile of family income was \$98,875 in 2010. This was down from the peak of \$122,034 reached 2007. The upper family income limit for the third quartile held about constant in real dollars between 1987 and 2010.

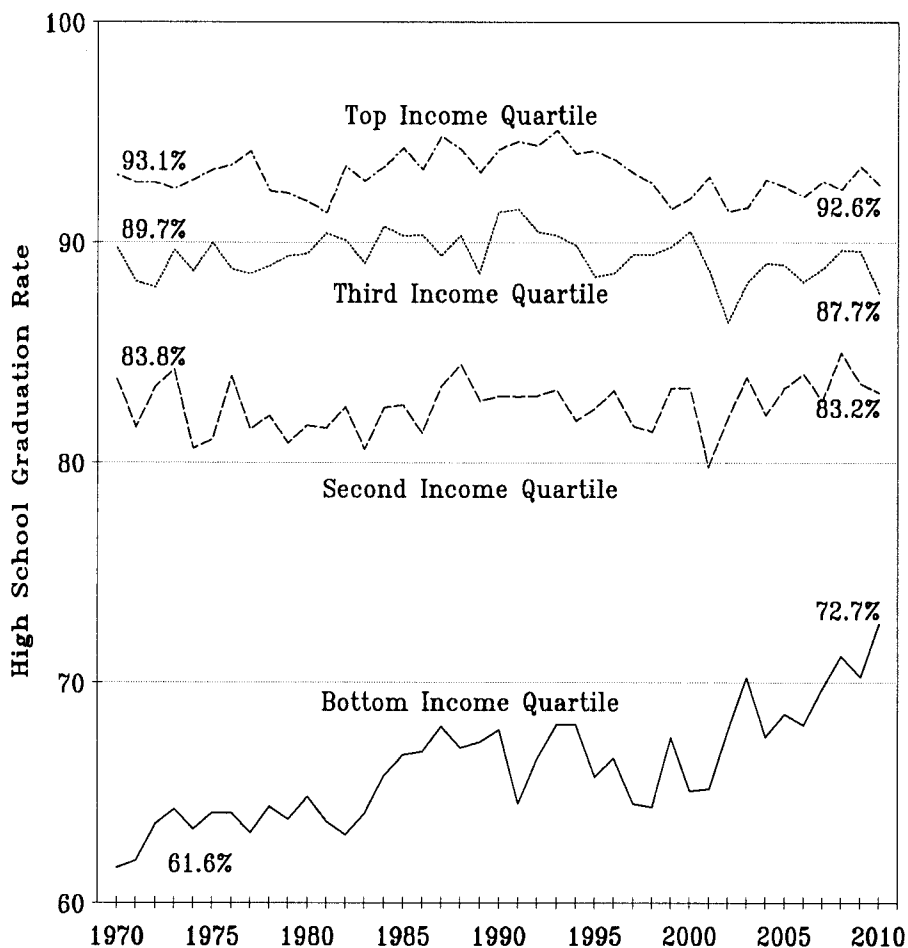
The growing income inequality measured by Gini Coefficients and other measures of income dispersion are reflected in the income data used in this analysis. In constant dollars, the upper limit of the bottom quartile of family income decreased by \$2451 between 1987 and 2010. The upper limit for the second quartile decreased by \$648. The upper limit for the third quartile increased by \$891. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

### High School Graduation

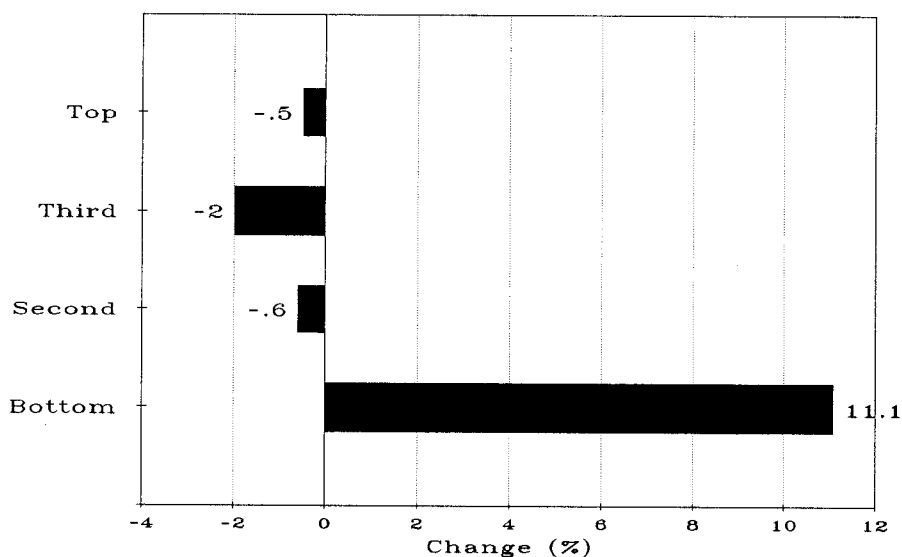
The first hurdle on the path to a bachelor's degree by age 24 is high school graduation. In 2010 83.4% of all 18 to 24 year old dependent family members were high school graduates or had obtained equivalent certification (usually GED). Out of a population of 18.1 million, there were 15.1 million high school graduates (or equivalents). Of course that means that 3.0 million were not high school graduates.

At this first hurdle high school graduation rates vary widely across family income quartiles. In 2010 the shares of dependent family members

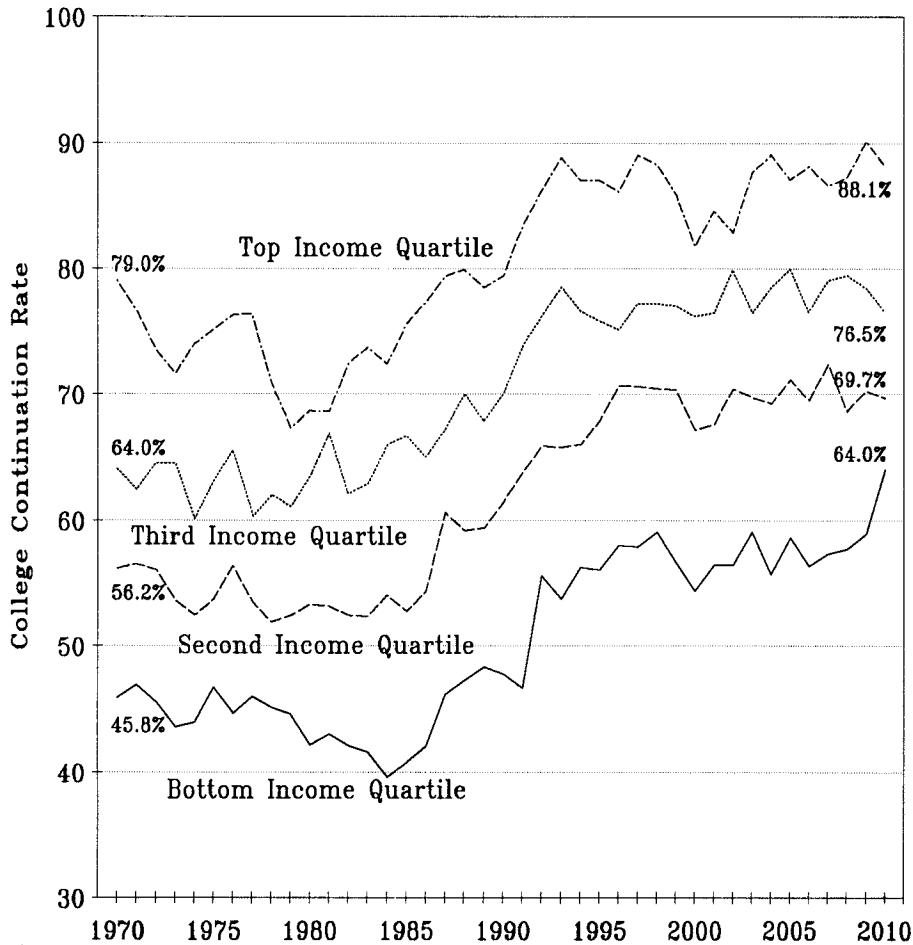
### High School Graduation Rates by Family Income Quartiles for Dependent 18 to 24 Year Olds 1970 to 2010



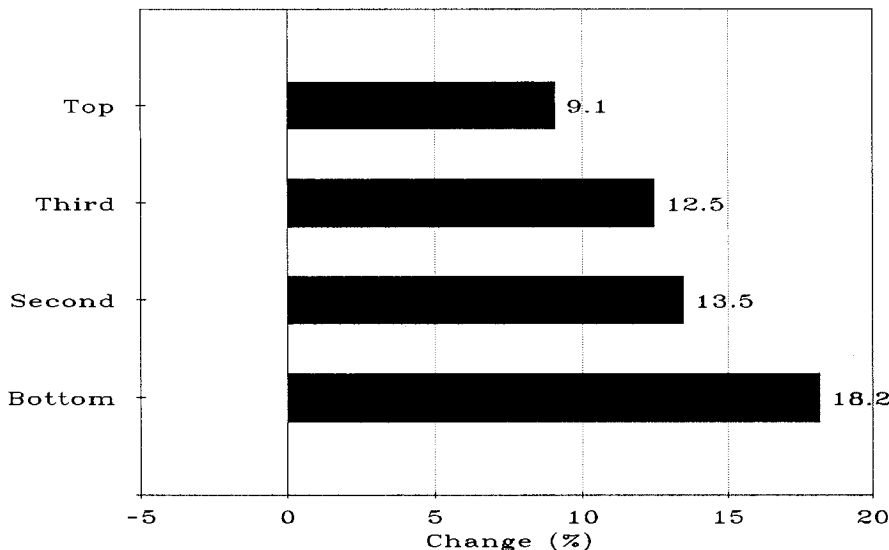
Change in High School Graduation Rate by Income Quartile 1970 to 2010



### College Continuation Rates by Family Income Quartiles for Dependent 18 to 24 Year Old High School Graduates 1970 to 2010



Change in College Continuation Rate by Income Quartile 1970 to 2010



ages 18 to 24 years who were high school graduates were:

- **72.7%** for those from the bottom quartile of family income, below \$33,050.
- **83.2%** for those from the second quartile of family income, between \$33,050 and \$61,600.
- **87.7%** for those from the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **92.6%** for those from the top quartile of family income, above \$98,875.

The trends to these data are striking. Over the 40 years of these data there have been slight declines in high school graduation rates for students from the top three quartiles of family income. Forty years of flatline.

But there has been quite significant improvement in the high school graduation rate for students from the bottom quartile of family income. Between 1970 and 2010 the high school graduation rate for this lowest income group increased by 11.1 percentage points.

#### College Continuation

In 2010 the college continuation rate for dependent 18 to 24 year old high school graduates that had graduated from high school was 74.6%. Out of a population of about 15.1 million high school graduates, about 11.2 million were either enrolled in college or had enrolled in college and left.

As shown in the chart on page 3, this rate declined from 61.3% in 1970 to its nadir of 56.3% in 1979. Then the college continuation rate rose to 73.8% in 1998. Since 1998 this rate has mostly fluctuated and in 2010 reached a new peak of 74.6%.

By quartiles of family income, the college continuation rates for those that had graduated from high school were:

- **64.0%** for those from the bottom family income quartile, below \$33,050.
- **69.7%** for high school graduates from the second family income quartile, between \$33,050 and \$61,600.
- **76.5%** for those from the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **88.1%** for those from the top quartile of family income, above \$98,875.

Very generally the rate trends for each family income quartile follow the overall trend--decline in the 1970s, rapid rise to the early to mid 1990s, followed by a flattening to the trend line. Only at the bottom of the quartile range are 2010 rates at record highs.

### College Participation

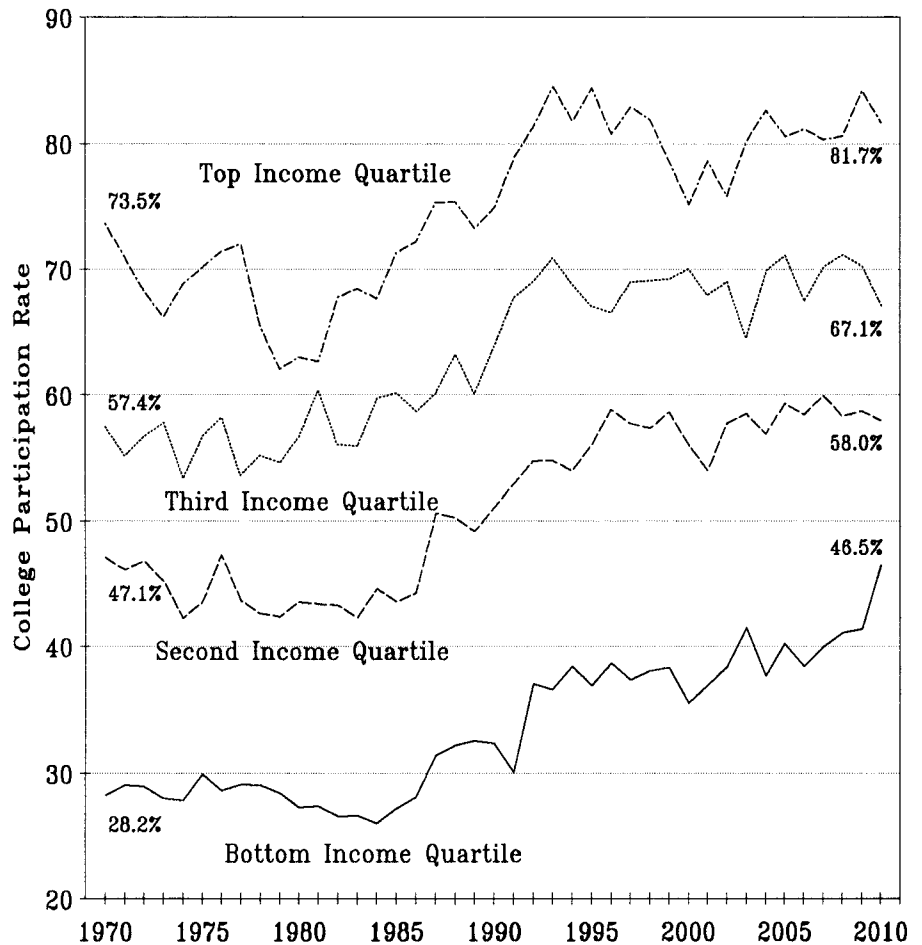
The college participation rate is the share of the population that has enrolled in college. It is the product of the high school graduation rate and the rate at which high school graduates have continued into college.

In 2010 the college continuation rate was 62.2%. This was the product of the high school graduation rate (83.4%) and the college continuation rate (74.6%). Out of a population of about 18.1 million dependent 18 to 24 year olds, about 11.2 million reached college while they were still dependent 18 to 24 year olds.

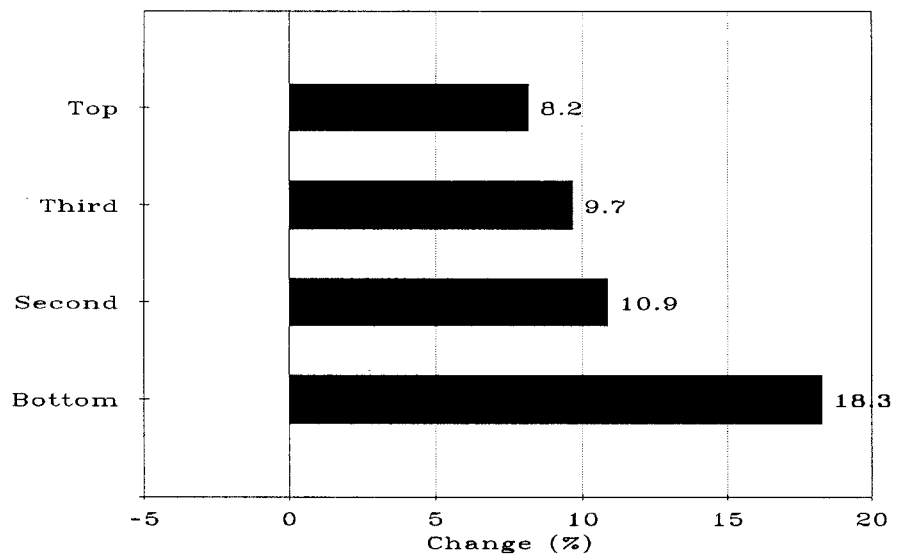
By quartiles of family income, the component rates both sorted students through high school graduation and into college at different rates. So this calculation magnifies the earlier disparities. By quartiles of family income the 2010 college participation rates were:

- **46.5%** for those from the bottom quartile of family income, below \$33,050.
- **58.0%** for students from the second

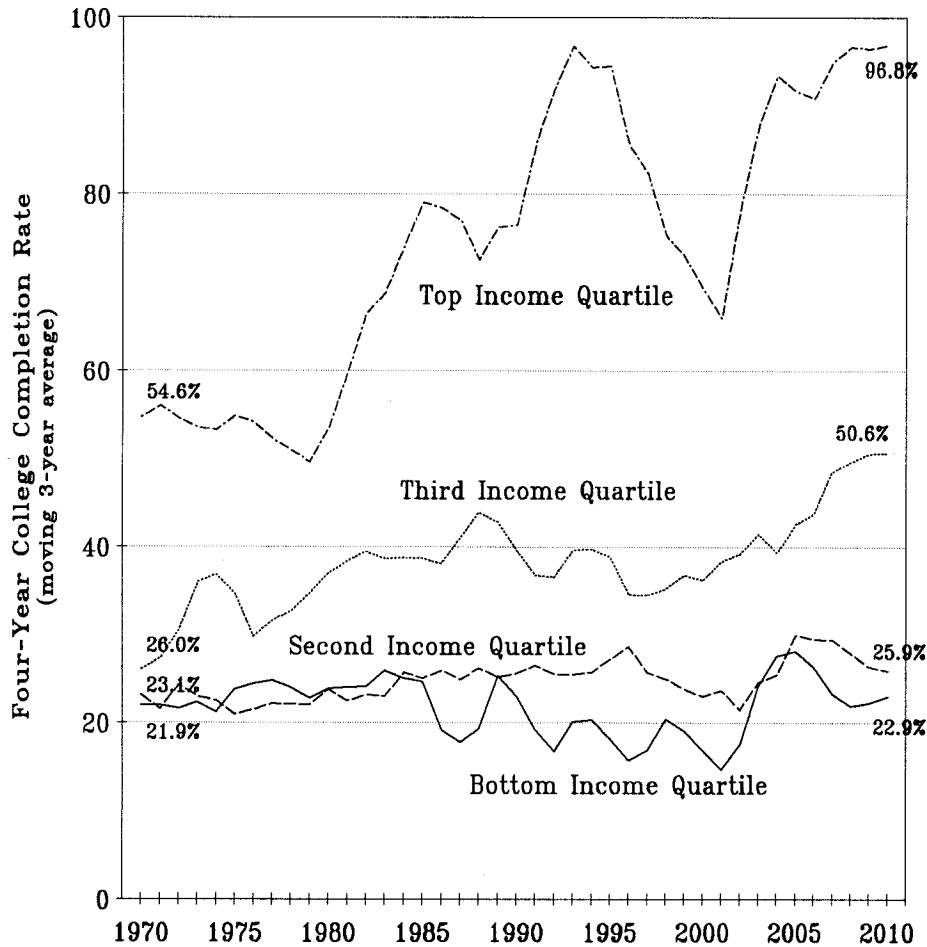
College Participation Rates by Family Income Quartiles  
for Dependent 18 to 24 Year Olds  
1970 to 2010



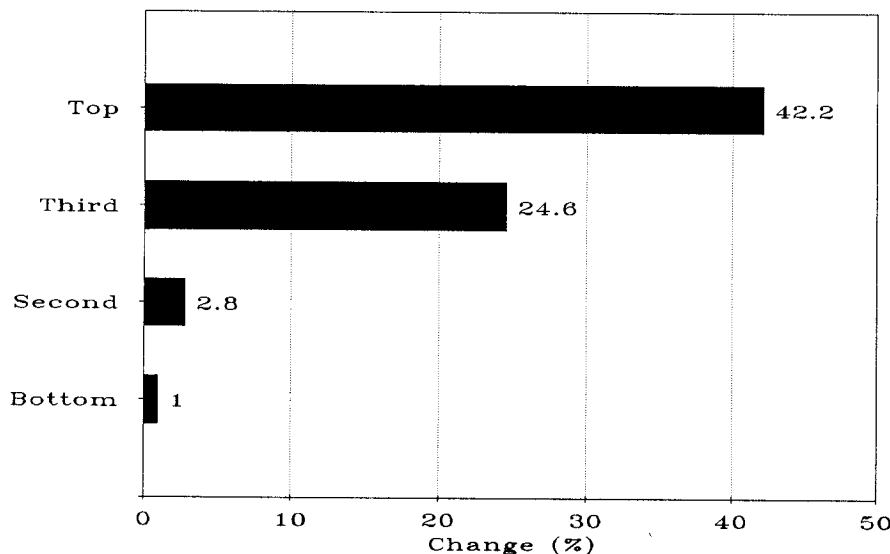
Change in College Participation Rate by Income Quartile  
1970 to 2010



**Estimated Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates by Age 24  
by Family Income Quartiles for Dependent College Students  
Who Began College, 1970 to 2010**



**Change in Estimated Completion Rate by Income Quartile  
1970 to 2010**



quartile of family income, between \$33,050 and \$61,600.

- **67.1%** for dependent 18 to 24 year olds from the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **81.7%** for those from the top quartile of family income, above \$98,875.

These data also show the flattening of college participation rate beginning around 1992. The increase in college participation rates in the 1980s stopped around 1992 for the top three quartiles, but has shown some real growth only in the bottom quartile of family income.

**Bachelor's Degree Completion by Age 24**

We estimate bachelor's degree completion rates for dependent family members age 18 to 24 years that begin college by combining data from the Census Bureau's (now) unpublished Table 14 with data originally collected in follow-ups to the 1980 High School and Beyond study file. We emphasize that these are estimates, and that they are our estimates. However, our estimates appear to be similar to results published by NCES and the Census Bureau using other data sources. This gives us confidence that what follows reasonably describes bachelor's degree completion behavior for those who start college.

In 2010 the bachelor's degree completion rate by age 24 for dependent family members was 46.7 percent. This rate has tended upward over the last four decades, from 33.8 percent in 1970. However, the trend has been erratic, as shown in the chart on page 3, with surges in the early 1980s and again in the last decade.

Of focal concern here, of course, is how bachelor's degree completion rates for those who have started postsecondary education have fared



across our four quartiles of family income for dependent 18 to 24 year olds. In 2010 the bachelor's degree completion rates were:

- **22.9%** for those from the bottom quartile of family income, below \$33,050.
- **25.9%** for students from the second quartile of family income, between \$33,050 and \$61,600.
- **50.6%** for those from the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **96.8%** for those from the top quartile of family income, above \$98,875.

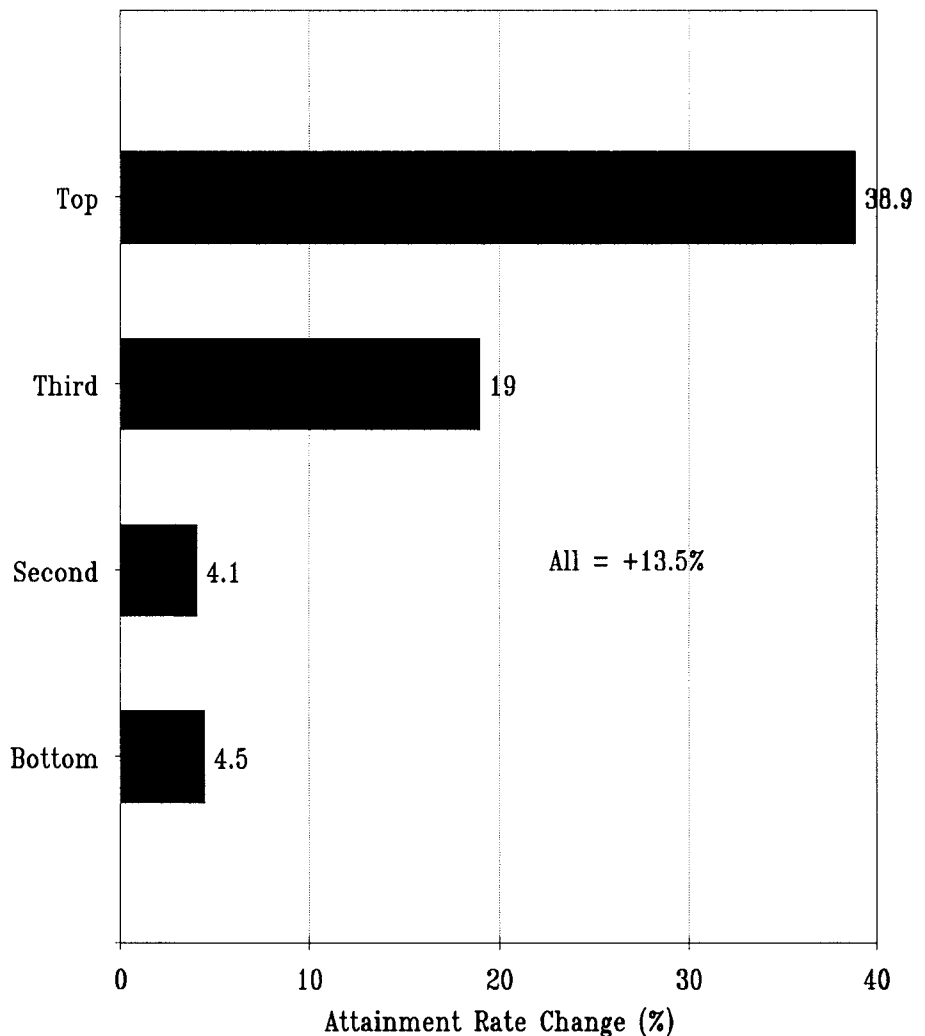
The data used in this analysis do not permit us to distinguish between students pursuing 2-year versus 4-year degrees--only bachelor's degrees. Thus our bachelor's degree completion rates would be higher if there were a way to distinguish bachelor's degree seeking students from those who aspire to less. Nevertheless, our data do appear to reasonably estimate the share of those starting college from each income quartile that complete a bachelor's degree by age 24.

The first chart on the previous page shows the estimated bachelor's degree completion rates by quartiles of family income for dependent 18 to 24 year old family members over the last four decades. The disparities and trends are clear, compelling and inescapable. Particularly since 1970 we have done a terrific job of increasing bachelor's degree completion rates, but almost entirely for students from the top half of the family income distribution. For students from the bottom half the results are almost non-existent.

#### **Bachelor's Degree Attainment by Age 24**

The chart on page 1 summarizes the attainment and progress of bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 of dependent family members 18 to 24 years old from each quartile of family

**Change in Estimated Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rate  
by Age 24 by Family Income Quartile  
1970 to 2010**



income between 1970 and 2010. By 2010 the share of the 24 year old quartile populations with a bachelor's degree were:

- **10.7%** for students from the bottom quartile of family income, below \$33,050.
- **15.0%** for students from the second quartile of family income, between \$33,050 and \$61,600.
- **33.9%** for those from the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **79.1%** for students from the top quartile of family income, above \$98,875.

That is to say by 2010 a student born into the top quartile of family income was nearly eight times more likely to have completed a bachelor's degree by age 24 than was a student born into the bottom quartile of family income.

The chart on this page shows the changes in the bachelor's degree attainment rates between 1970 and 2010. Clearly the higher education system has expanded bachelor's degree attainment over this period, by 13.5%.

But as this chart makes clear, the result of regressive policy choices has

produced most of the benefits for students born into the most affluent families, and the fewest benefits for students born into families from the lowest half of the family income distribution.

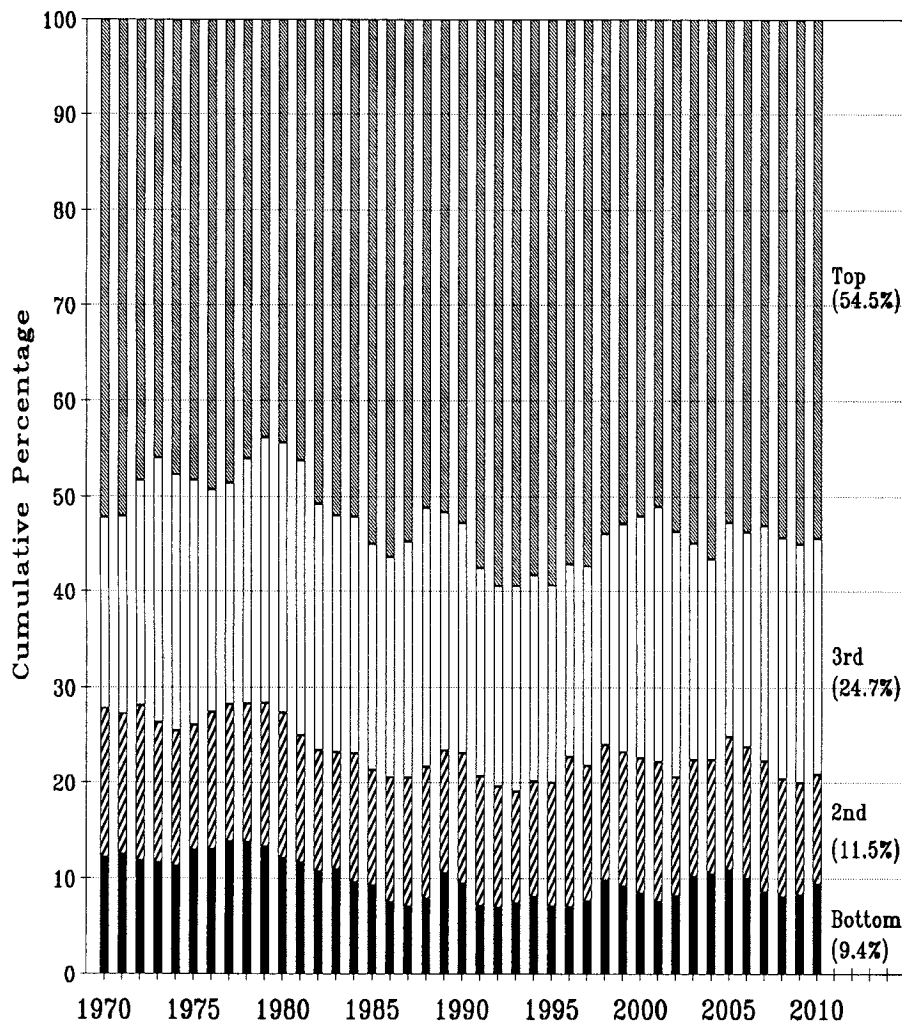
Between 1970 and 2010 the share of 24 year olds with a bachelor's degree increased by:

- **4.5%** for those from the bottom quartile of family income.
- **4.1%** for students from the second quartile of family income.
- **19.0%** for students from the third quartile of family income.
- **38.9%** for students from the top

quartile of family income.

During the regressive policy era of the last 30 years the education system has done a marvelous job of increasing bachelor's degree attainment. However, these benefits have accrued overwhelmingly to students born into affluence. Almost none of these benefits have been shared with students from families with the most limited means for paying the costs of higher education. There is no clearer demonstration of the consequences of regressive policy choices than this chart on page 9.

**Distribution of Bachelor's Degrees Awarded  
by Age 24 by Family Income Quartiles  
1970 to 2010**



Another way of highlighting this redistribution of higher education opportunity is to calculate the ratio of attainment from the top to the bottom quartiles of family income. This ratio is:

- **7.4 times**, in 2010. The attainment rates for the top quartile was 79.07%, compared to 10.66% for the bottom quartile.
- **8.9 times**, in 2009.
- **8.7 times**, in 2008.
- **8.2 times**, in 2007.
- **7.3 times**, in 2006.
- **8.7 times**, in 2000.
- **7.7 times**, in 1990.
- **5.2 times**, in 1980.
- **6.5 times**, in 1970.

A third way of showing the distribution of bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 for dependent family members across quartiles of family income is shown in the chart on this page. In 2010:

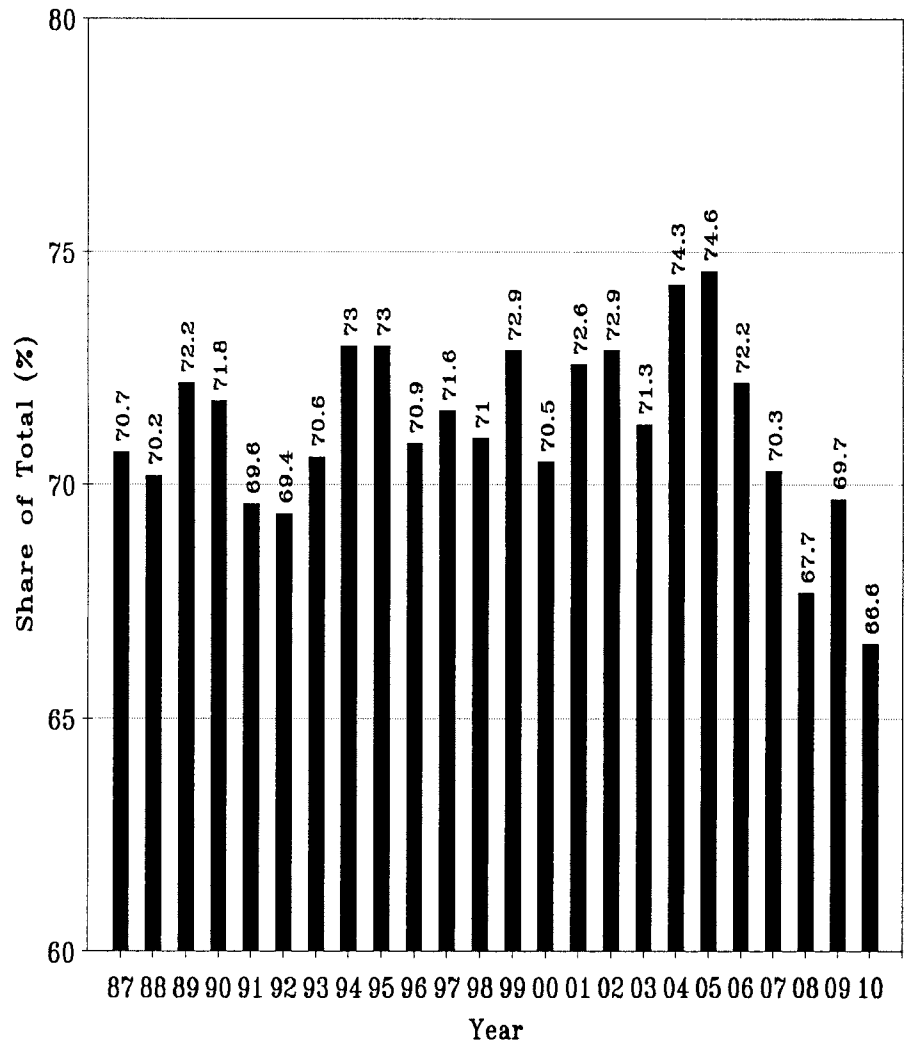
- **54.5%** of all bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 were awarded to students born into the top 25% of family income, above \$98,875.
- **24.7%** of all bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 were awarded to students born into the third quartile of family income, between \$61,600 and \$98,875.
- **11.5%** of all bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 were awarded to students from the second quartile of family income, between \$33,060 and \$61,600.
- **9.4%** of all bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 were awarded to students from the bottom quartile of family income, below \$33,060.

That is 54.5% of bachelor's degrees went to the top 25% of the income distribution, and 20.9% of these degrees went to students from the bottom 50% of the family income distribution.

Since 1980 there has been a redistribution of bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24.

- **Top quartile:** In 1980 students from the top 25% of family income earned 44.3% of all bachelor's degrees that were awarded by age 24. In 2010 this family income quartile begins at \$98,875. This share grew quickly to 59.4% in 1992 and 1993, then shrank back to 51.0% by 2001. Market share growth then resumed again to 56.6% in 2004. Since 1982 students from the top 25% of family income have always earned more than 50% of the bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24.
- **Third quartile:** The third family income quartile's share of bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 has ranged between 20.1% (1970, 1996) and 28.8% (1981) over the last 40 years. In 2010 this family income range was \$61,600 to \$98,875. The 2010 share of 24.7% falls within the middle of this range.
- **Second quartile:** The second family income quartile's share of bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 has ranged from 11.5% (2010) to 16.3% (1972). This income range was \$33,060 to \$61,600 in 2010. Over the last 40 years the share has drifted downward, from an average of 14.7% in the 1970s, to 13.3% in the 1980s, to 13.4% in the 1990s, to 13.1% in the 2000s. The 2010 share of 11.5% was the smallest share in the last 41 years that these data have been calculated.
- **Bottom quartile:** The bottom family income quartile's share of bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 has ranged from 13.9% (1977) to 7.0% (1992). The 2010 share of 9.4% is closer to the bottom of this range. This family income range is below \$33,060 in 2010. Over the last four decades the share of bachelor's degrees awarded to the bottom quartile has been very low and shrinking: 12.6% in the 1970s, 9.7% in the 1980s, 8.0% in the 1990s, and 9.1% in the 2000s.

### Share of Dependent 18 to 24 Old Enrollment in 4-Year Institutions 1987 to 2010



The distribution of bachelor's degrees awarded by age 24 across family income quartiles has always been skewed in favor of the affluent over the last 40 years. The top 25% of the income distribution has never earned less than about 44% of these degrees, and currently receives about 55%.

The shifts in market shares since 1970 have been important because they have strengthened the skewed distribution evident from the earliest data in this time series. These shifts have been especially significant since 1980 when educational policy reversed course and

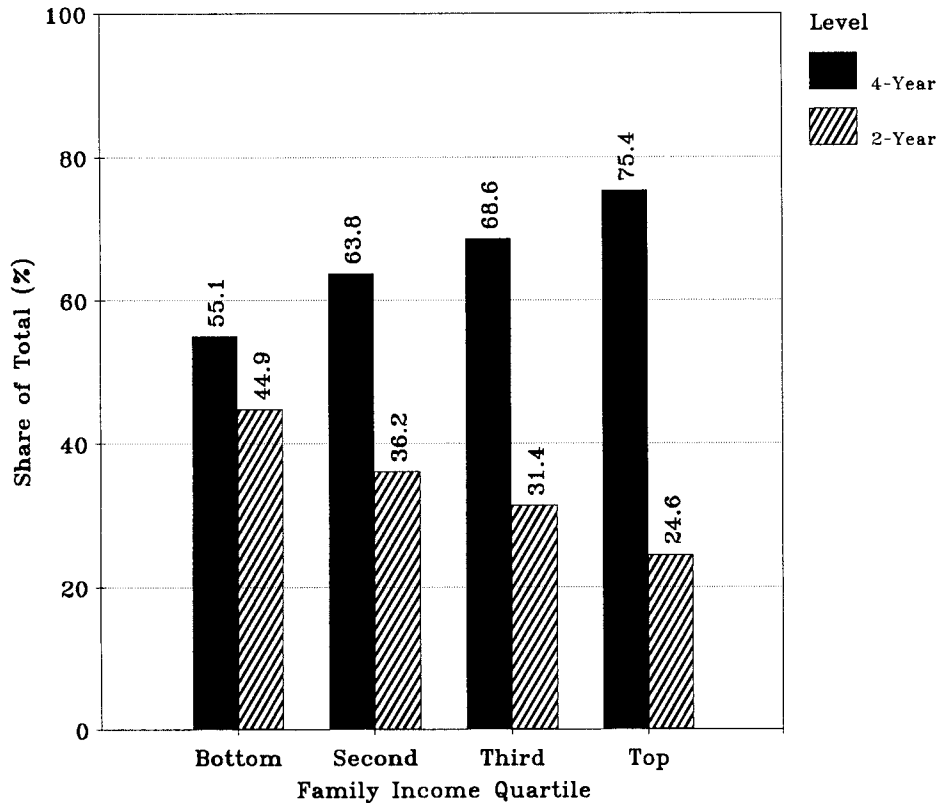
shifted from progressive to regressive, from inclusive to exclusive, and from advancing to stagnating.

#### Enrollment Distribution by Level

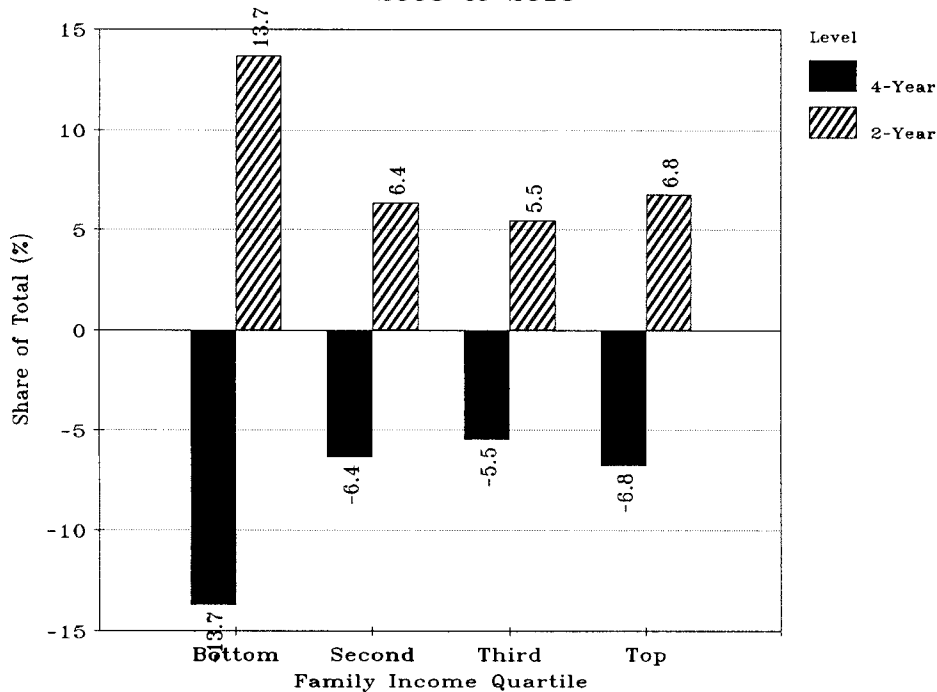
From 1987 through 2005 the share of college students who were dependent 18 to 24 year old family members that were enrolled in 4-year institutions increased. This increase was from 70.7% in 1987 to a peak of 74.6% in 2005.

Thereafter the 4-year college/university share of students quickly

Distribution of Dependent 18 to 24 Year Old Enrollment  
by Institutional Level and Family Income  
2010



Change in Distribution of Dependent 18 to 24 Enrollment  
by Institutional Level and Family Income  
2005 to 2010



plummeted to 67.7% in 2008. This was the smallest share of dependent 18 to 24 year old family members enrolled in 4-year colleges in the 22 years of data. But this record too was broken with the 2010 data when 66.6% were enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities.

Of course this analysis is primarily interested in disaggregating data into quartiles of family income. In 2010 the share of enrolled dependent 18 to 24 year olds distributed across 4-year and 2-year institutions varied in predictable ways across family income quartiles.

- **Bottom quartile.** Where family incomes fell below \$33,050, 55.1% of dependent 18 to 24 year olds were enrolled in 4-year institutions, and 44.9% were enrolled in 2-year institutions.
- **Second quartile.** Where family incomes ranged between \$33,050 and \$61,600, 63.8% were enrolled in 4-year institutions and 36.2% in 2-year colleges.
- **Third quartile.** Between \$61,600 and \$98,875 of family income, students were distributed 68.6% in 4-year and 31.4% in 2-year institutions.
- **Top quartile.** Above \$98,875, 75.4% of students were enrolled in 4-year institutions, and 24.6% were in 2-year schools.

The large enrollment shift from 4-year to 2-year institutions occurred between 2005 and 2010. The largest shift was among students from the lowest income families--13.7 percentage points in market share. The smallest shift was among students from the third family income quartile--5.5 percentage points in market share. These shifts are shown in the second chart on this page.

These kinds of enrollment shifts are not new. Using Pell Grant recipient data OPPORTUNITY has reported that the share of Pell Grant recipients

that were enrolled in 4-year institutions--both public and private--declined from 61.3% in FY1980 to 41.3% by FY2009 (OPPORTUNITY #207, September 2009). The most recent data for FY2010 shows 38.9% of Pell Grant recipients enrolled in public and private 4-year colleges and universities.

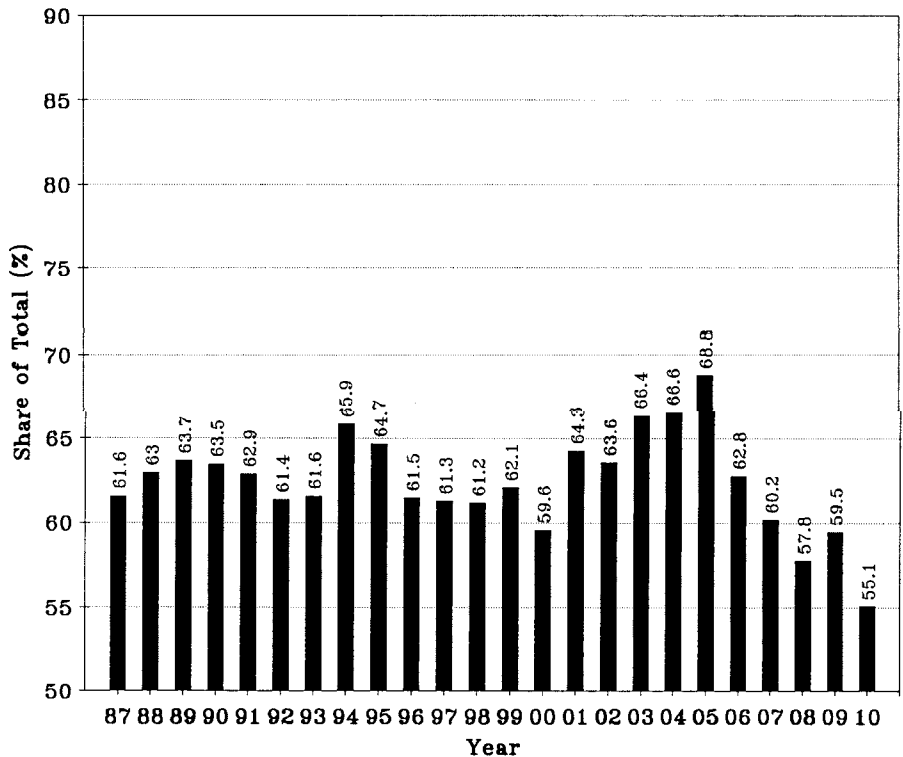
Among dependent Pell Grant recipients the decline was from 69.0% in FY1980 to 58.8% by FY2008. Among independent Pell Grant recipients the decline was from 48.4% in FY1980 to 33.1% by FY2008. Of course this means that if these students are not enrolled in 4-year institutions, they must have been enrolled in 2-year institutions--community colleges and proprietary schools. And they increasingly are.

Because students from different family income circumstances enroll in 4-year and 2-year institutions at notably different rates, and because of the shift from 4-year to 2-year institutions that began after 2005, we have calculated the 4-year shares for each of the last 23 years at each family income quartile. These shares are shown in the two charts on this page, and the two on page 14.

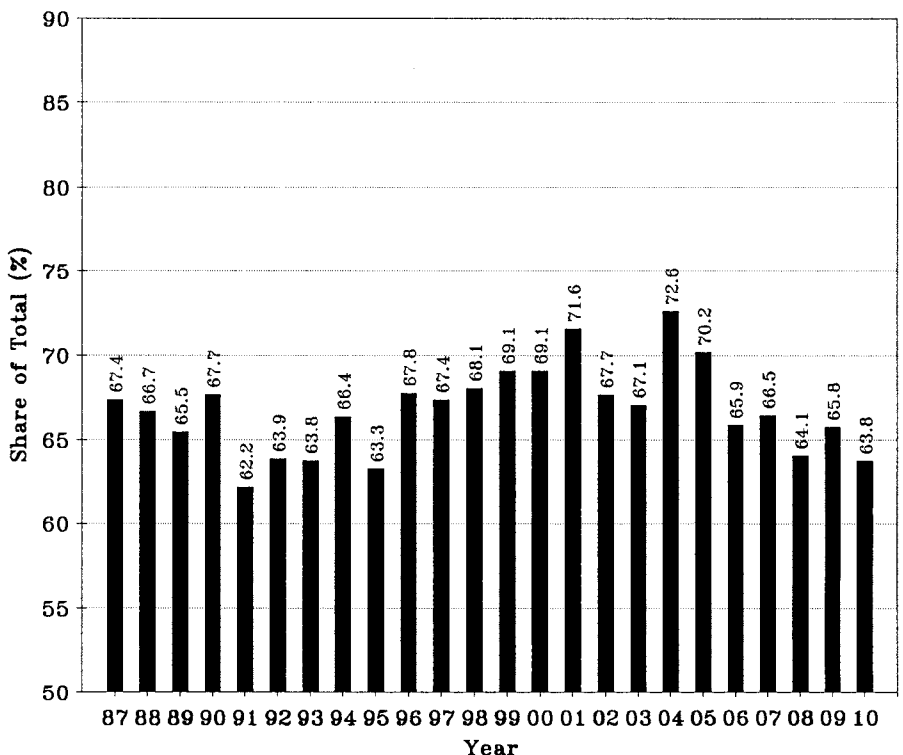
**Bottom quartile.** Between 1987 and 2005 the share of dependent 18 to 24 year olds from the bottom family income quartile enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities increased, from 61.6% to a peak of 68.8%. Since 2005 the share has collapsed to an all time low of 55.1%. The average for the 24 years of available data is 62.4%. For the last four years the 4-year share from the bottom quartile has been well below this average.

**Second quartile.** The share of those from the second quartile of family income enrolled in 4-year colleges has ranged between 62.2% (1991) and 72.6% (2004). The average share

Share of Dependent 18 to 24 Old Enrollment  
from Bottom Family Income Quartile in 4-Year Institutions  
1987 to 2010



Share of Dependent 18 to 24 Old Enrollment  
from Second Family Income Quartile in 4-Year Institutions  
1987 to 2010



over the last 23 years has been 66.8%. For the last five years the shares have fallen below the 23 year average.

*Third quartile.* As shown in the two charts on this page, OPPORTUNITY was unable to calculate sector shares for three of the last 24 years. So for the 21 years of available data, the share of third quartile dependent 18 to 24 year olds enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities ranged from 68.6% (2010) and 76.7% (2002). The average for the 21 years was 71.5%. For the last four years the 4-year share of third quartile students has fallen below this average. The 2010 share was the smallest on record.

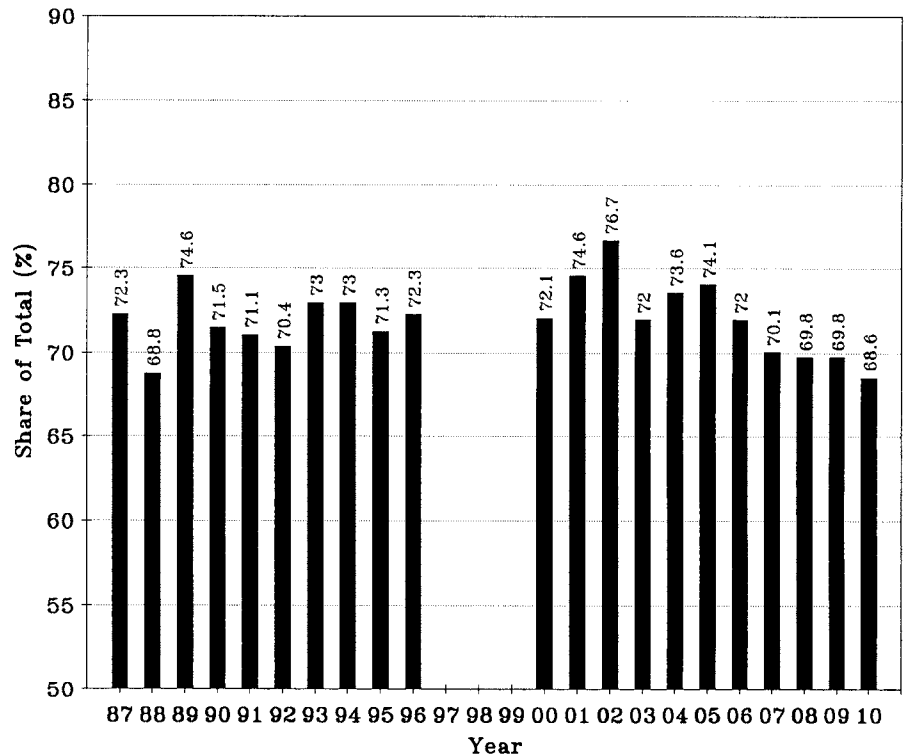
*Top quartile.* The share of dependent 18 to 24 year olds from the top quartile of family income enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities ranged between 75.2% (2008) and 86.3% (1995) between 1987 and 2009. The average for the 18 years of available data was 77.7%. Two of the last three years had the lowest shares over the 21 year period of available data.

These data provide hard evidence that students from the highest income families are most likely to be enrolled at 4-year colleges and universities (public or private). This finding holds for each year between 1987 and 2010. Students from families with the lowest incomes are consistently least likely to be enrolled in 4-year institutions.

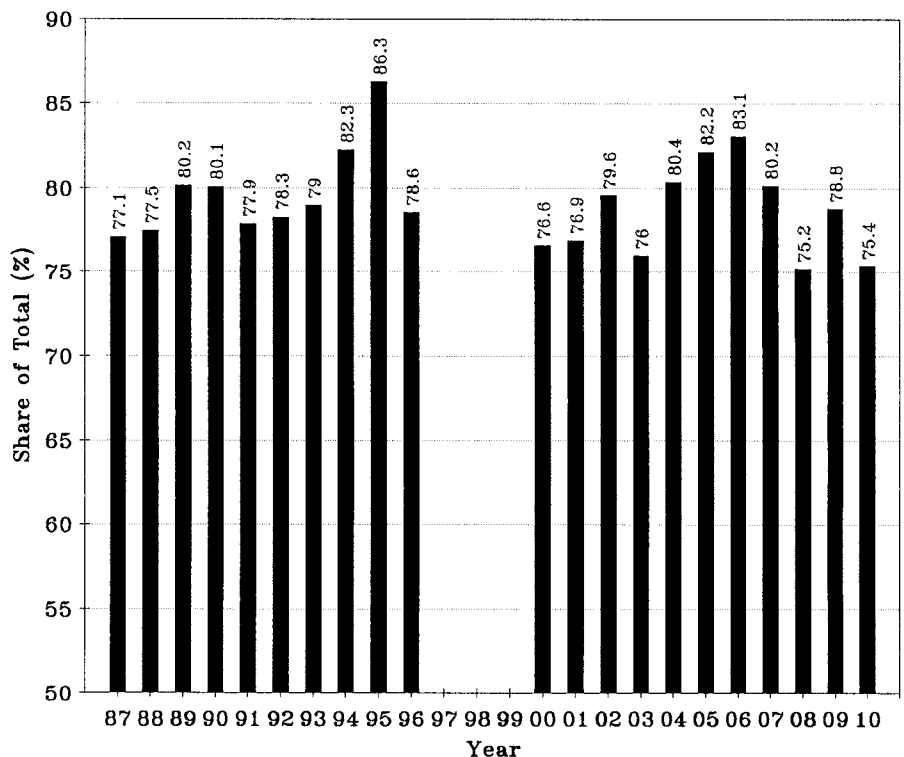
The gap between the two groups of students from the top and bottom family income quartiles has always been wide. This gap averaged about 16.8 percentage points between 1987 and 1996. Between 2003 and 2005 the gap narrowed to 12.3 percentage points. Then, for the last five years from 2006 through 2010 the gap has reopened to its widest on record, averaging 19.5 percentage points.

The significance of this finding follows from one of the oldest findings

Share of Dependent 18 to 24 Old Enrollment  
from Third Family Income Quartile in 4-Year Institutions  
1987 to 2010



Share of Dependent 18 to 24 Old Enrollment  
from Top Family Income Quartile in 4-Year Institutions  
1987 to 2010



on student completion from student enrollment research: If a student wants to earn a bachelor's degree, he/she must meet three conditions to maximize the probability of success. These conditions are:

- 1) enrollment in college immediately following high school graduation,
- 2) enrollment as a full-time student, and
- 3) enrollment in a 4-year institution.

Failure to meet all three conditions immediately reduces the student's chances of ever completing a bachelor's degree.

### Enrollment Distribution by Status

In 2010 86.5% of dependent 18 to 24 year olds in college were enrolled on a full-time basis. Just 13.5% were enrolled part-time. 85.8% of males and 87.3% of females were enrolled full-time.

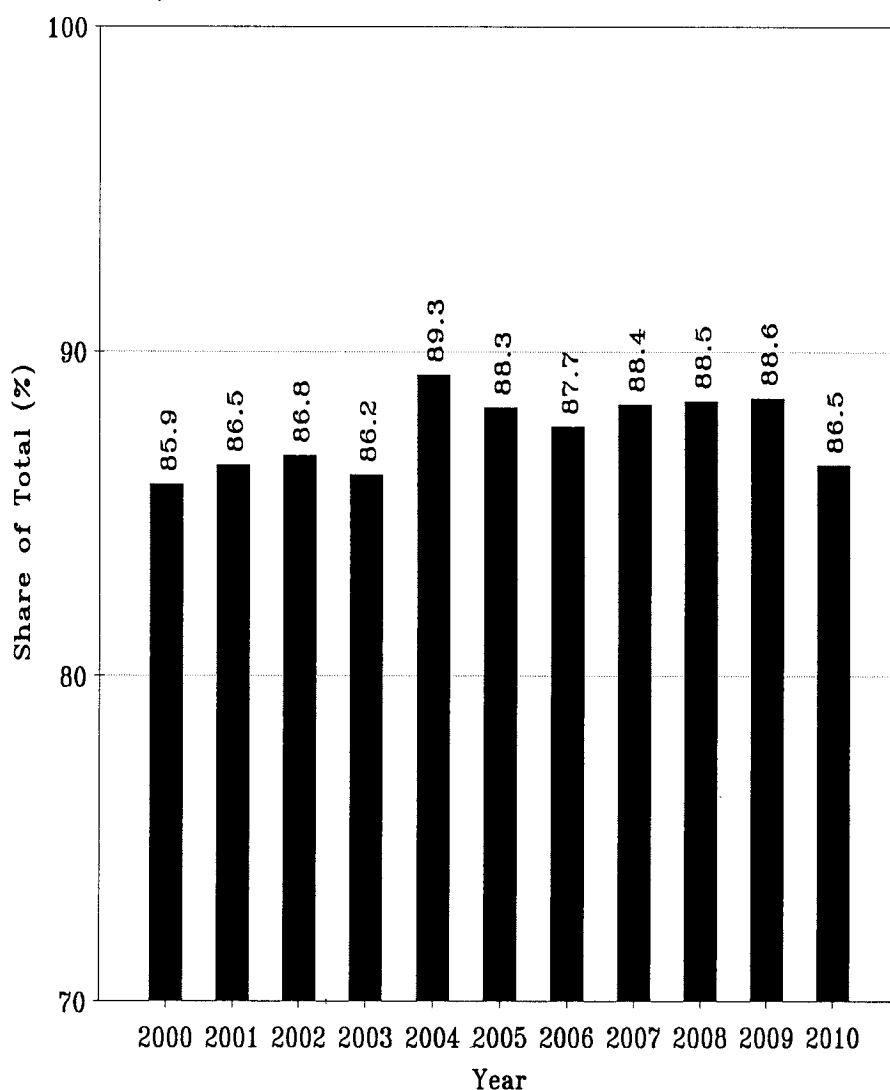
Since 2000 the share of these students who were enrolled full time has gradually and steadily increased, from a low of 85.9% in 2000 to 88.6% by 2009. However, in 2010 this share dropped to 86.5%.

Our analysis, however, is mainly interested in how students from different family income backgrounds experience higher education. And, as one would expect, students from the highest income families are more likely to be enrolled full-time than are students from lower income families. In 2010 the full-time enrollment shares were:

- **82.8%** for those from the bottom quartile of family income.
- **84.4%** for those from the second quartile of family income.
- **87.1%** for students from the third quartile of family income.
- **90.5%** for students from the top quartile of family income.

Between 2000 and 2010 the share of

Share of Dependents 18 to 24 Enrolled Full-Time  
2000 to 2010



students in the top two family income quartiles that were enrolled full-time increased. The share of students enrolled full-time declined in the bottom two family income quartiles. Between 2000 and 2010 the full-time enrollment rates:

- **Decreased by 0.5 percentage points** for those from the bottom quartile of family incomes, from 83.3% to 82.8%.
- **Decreased by 0.8 percentage points** for students from the second quartile of family income, from 85.2% to 84.4%.
- **Increased by 0.8 percentage**

**points** for students from the third quartile of family income, from 86.3% to 87.1%.

- **Increased by 2.8 percentage points** for students from the top quartile of family income, from 87.7% to 90.5%.

### Summary and Conclusions

This report on the probability of earning a bachelor's degree by age 24 by family income quartiles is the 21st in a series that began in 1990. Since the first publication, the disparities in bachelor's degree attainment between

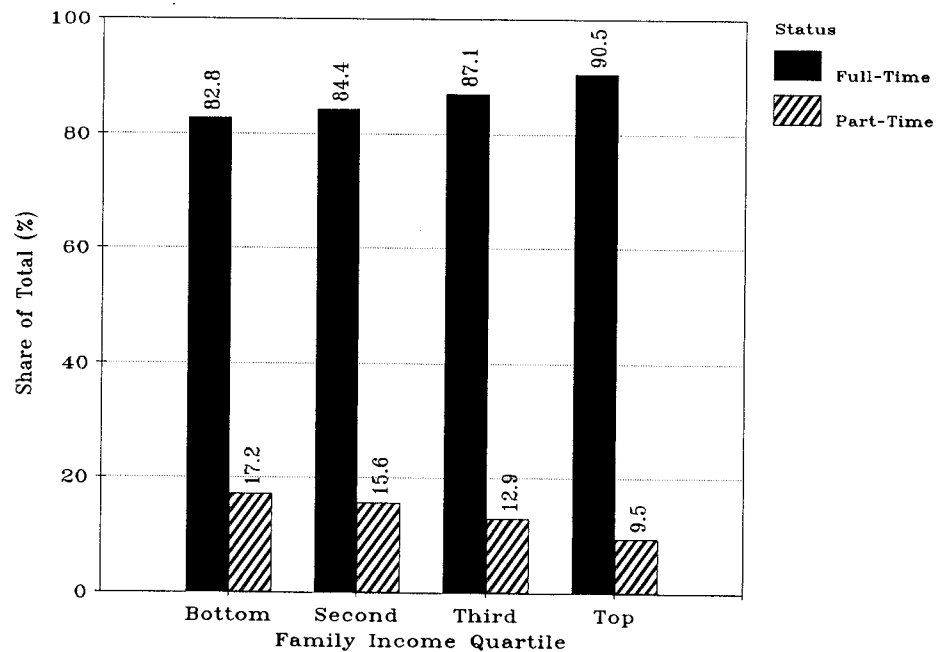
the top and bottom halves of the family income distribution have widened and worsened. After 21 years of reporting these data, we hoped policy makers would have taken notice and acted to correct this deteriorating situation for the growing low income populations in every state.

However the U.S. threw in the towel and gave up trying to help students from lower income families about three decades ago, around 1980. Since 1980:

- The federal government has retreated from need based grants and moved toward loans and tax credits for students.
- States have sharply reduced their higher education investment efforts, and shifted the costs of higher education to students through higher tuitions. States have also moved toward merit scholarships.
- Four 4-year institutions have become focused on maximizing tuition revenues from students and ranking among peer institutions. Institutions too have moved toward merit scholarships.

This is class warfare. The stunning gains by low income students in high school graduation rates and college continuation rates have been offset by ever greater financial barriers to higher education. The students have tried. But their efforts have been ignored and frustrated by deliberate, purposeful, persistent and pervasive federal, state and institutional policy choices that thwart their best efforts. These policy choices have had their most devastating impact on students from the bottom half of the family income distribution. This is class warfare.

**Distribution of Dependent 18 to 24 Year Old Enrollment by Enrollment Status and Family Income 2010**



**Change in Distribution of Dependent 18 to 24 Enrollment by Enrollment Status and Family Income 2000 to 2010**

