

By the Numbers: Snapshot of Arizona's Postsecondary Education System
Tom Mortenson

Since 1973 there is clear evidence that incomes in the United States have been redistributed according to educational attainment. The trend is for salaries to be higher for those workers who have attained the most formal education, and, of course, for those with the least formal education to earn substantially less. As global competition has increased, higher education attainment in the United States since 2000 has begun to erode. In Arizona there are clear reflections of this trend, as poverty and employment rates can be tied to income levels.

In this last regard there are a number of discouraging facts about the current situation in Arizona. Arizona ranks 38th among the states in population who have at least a high school diploma in the age bracket of 25 years and older, while studies clearly show that per capita income and household income are linked to level of education, even at the bachelors level.

On average, public high school graduation rates in Arizona have been below the national average over the past decade. College continuation rates in the state have been less than 50%, again well below the national average. These trends lead Arizona to rank near the bottom for states where students have a chance to attend college by the age of 19. During the same time period, state appropriations for higher education have shrunk markedly compared to other states.

Of interest is the fact that while in-state students are not participating in higher education at an encouraging rate, there is a significant migration of postsecondary students from outside the state. In addition, it is clear that the workforce in Arizona and its concomitant level of education has been imported, as opposed to "growing our own." As the level of education in the imported work force has dropped in recent years, this has negatively impacted an economy that has become reliant on this infusion of education.

Mortensen points to the changing world of work and the necessity for Arizona to adapt. Goods-producing employment has markedly declined in the United States in the past 50 years, and the private service sector has grown aggressively. Health care and education are the leaders in growth, with business and hospitality next in expansion.

With this shift in how the economy is balanced has come a shift in the nature of the workforce itself. The median annual income for males over 25 years in the country between 1973 and 2005 DECLINED in every education bracket except for those males earning advanced degrees. Meanwhile the median annual income for females over 25 years in the same time period has INCREASED in every education bracket.

Concomitant with these trends has been a demographic trend from white to minority and from higher income to lower income students. This change, not surprisingly, matches birth trends over time. Further, there is a clear and understandable trend over the past thirty in which high school graduates are increasingly minority and poor, and birth rates indicate that this trend will continue.

So what does all of this portend for the United States and for Arizona in particular? Mortenson points out that in 1998 the United States was tied for first in the world in the percent of 25- to-34-year olds with bachelor's degrees. By 2005 we had slipped to 7th, and are projected to continue the downward spiral. In Arizona, the situation is bleak, but not hopeless. Resident tuition and fees for all higher education sectors in Arizona are comparatively low on a national scale. We know also that there is much room for improvement in state appropriations for higher education. Dedicating state resources to shoring up the secondary school environment in response to shifting demographic of Arizona students is also an obvious area for improvement. In order for such a move to be effective, it must be coupled with broader economic support for an Arizona population that is increasingly minority, poor, and underprepared educationally. That is, the answer is not simply one of education. If we are to again "grow our own" we must plant seeds and nourish them.

At the same time, Mortenson urges the state not to ignore the potential resource represented by those students who come to Arizona to study. In the first, place he points out that they infuse the economy, as well as our education system, with dollars. That said, they can potentially infuse the system also with skills and expertise that come with education. We should look for incentives to encourage students who came to study at least in part for the weather and lifestyle of the Southwest to remain in the area as they pursue careers. This can be done in some measure by the state's ability to encourage the businesses that will attract graduates of Arizona's higher education system to locate or expand into the area.

The data are unambiguous that in a country that is falling behind the rest of the world in education and the benefits that come from an educated workforce, Arizona is not in a position to exert leadership, or even to compete internally in the United States. This situation stems in part from demographic and economic shifts to which the state has not responded adequately. Part of this lack of response is the failure of Arizona to capitalize on its education system—at all levels—to build a pipeline into our higher education system from inside the state and especially from outside the state at the higher education level. The second piece is then to build an infrastructure within Arizona that will influence graduates to stay and contribute to the economy of the state.