New Report on High School Graduates Projects Dramatic Changes

Boulder, Colorado — The United States is undergoing a demographic sea change, one that has strong implications for our education system and our economy. As Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State and Race/Ethnicity, 1992 to 2022, indicates, the U.S. production of high school graduates is set to begin a long decline, fueled by precipitous drops in the Northeast and Midwest. Our nation and many states will also witness a dramatic shift in the racial/ethnic composition of their student bodies and high school graduating classes, with rising numbers of graduates from populations our educational institutions haven’t served well in the past – especially Hispanics – offsetting a substantial decline in White non-Hispanic graduates.

“The challenge of ensuring a high-quality education for all Americans has never been greater,” says David Longanecker, president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), which published Knocking at the College Door, with support from ACT and the College Board. “In the next decade, our nation will grapple with dramatic population changes. Many states in the West and South will struggle with explosive growth in both school enrollments and graduate numbers, while in the Northeast and Midwest, a high number of states will see declines as their populations age or move away. The face of our graduating classes is also changing. Today, White non-Hispanics make up a shrinking proportion of public school enrollments and graduates, while students from other groups – including some who have not been served well historically by our school systems or our colleges and universities, particularly Hispanics – are seeing their numbers rise.”

Knocking at the College Door, now in its 7th edition, quantifies those changes. Three major findings:

• After 14 straight years of rapid growth in high school graduate numbers, the U.S. will top out this year. Beginning in 2008-09, projections point to a gradual, downward trajectory for the nation, with graduate numbers falling to their lowest point around 2013-14 and then slowly rising.

• Regions will see highly variable change. Between the peak year of 2007-08 and 2021-22, the Northeast’s high school graduate numbers will shrink by 13 percent, while the Midwest’s will drop by 7 percent. But the West will see growth of 5 percent, and the South will see double that. Nationally, the number will rise by 6 percent.

• All four regions will see increasing student diversity, driven by declines in the share of White non-Hispanic graduates and increases in Hispanic numbers, as well as those of Asian Pacific/Islanders. And in some regions the change will be dramatic. In the West, the Class of 2010 is projected to be the first “majority minority” class (with less than 50 percent of graduates being White non-Hispanic), while the South will see its first majority minority graduating class in 2017. Individual states like California, Texas, Hawaii, and New Mexico are already there, and more are expected to follow in their path in the near future.

Such diversity holds rich promise for our country – not just for our culture but also for our economy. “More and more minority students, particularly Hispanics, are taking the ACT college admission and placement exam and aspiring to go to college,” says Richard L. Ferguson, ACT’s CEO and chairman of the
board. “Encouragingly, we’ve also seen a gradual improvement in scores in recent years. Nevertheless, ACT data suggests we must do a much better job of preparing these young people for success. The valuable research by WICHE strongly underscores the importance of achieving this goal. We applaud WICHE’s efforts to help all of us better understand the changing composition of our next generation.”

How to best educate and prepare our changing student body presents a major challenge to our K-12 educational system and our postsecondary institutions, as well as to our nation as a whole. “If the United States is to maintain its place of leadership in a global economy, our society must educate all of our citizens, especially those students who have been poorly served in the past,” says College Board President Gaston Caperton. “The College Board is proud to support WICHE’s insightful research. The data in Knocking at the College Door will prove extremely useful to our members and to other educators and policymakers, as they plan for the challenges ahead.”

Knocking at the College Door and individual state profiles are posted at www.wiche.edu/policy/Knocking. Hard copies of the report can be ordered online.

About WICHE, ACT & the College Board

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and its 15 member states work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy among states and institutions, WICHE strengthens higher education’s contributions to the region’s social, economic, and civic life. Our programs – Student Exchange, WCET, Policy Analysis and Research, and Mental Health – are working to find answers to some of the most critical questions facing higher education today. WICHE is the only organization in the West that focuses exclusively on higher education issues, from access and accountability to tuition and fees to distance learning and innovation. Public higher education is the primary backbone of the Western economy, and WICHE’s policy research and collaborative programs support the West’s citizens and its constantly evolving cultures. WICHE’s 15 member states include Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. For more information about WICHE, please visit www.wiche.edu.

ACT is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides more than 100 assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education and workforce development. Each year, we serve millions of people in elementary and secondary schools, colleges, professional associations, businesses, and government agencies, nationally and internationally. ACT has offices across the United States and throughout the world. Though designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose: helping people achieve education and workplace success.

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the association is composed of more than 5,400 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves 7 million students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through major programs and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning. Among its best-known programs are the SAT, the PSAT/NMSQT, and the Advanced Placement Program (AP). The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities, and concerns.

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