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The New Demography Has Arrived

Demographic projections have indicated for years that changes among the traditional-age college population—in number and in characteristic—would have profound effects on colleges and universities across the country. By 2008, small annual population changes that had been cumulatively developing for decades began to take full effect. The effects of the change will continue to evolve for years and decades to come with increasingly dramatic consequences for colleges and universities everywhere.

Changing demography has already begun to reshape both the student profile and the student experience at CSB and SJU in profound ways likely not imagined as recently as five years ago. No other college in Minnesota has changed its racial, ethnic, and cultural profile more quickly in recent years than CSB and SJU. Our students increasingly reflect the “new demography” of America. We should be proud of that. But at the same time, we also must redouble our commitment to meeting the changing needs, aspirations, and expectations of a new generation of students. We certainly are up to that.

By the Numbers

After rising by nearly 36 percent between 1993-94 and 2008-09, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. peaked in 2010-11 at 3.4 million, the largest graduating class in the nation’s history.¹ Unfortunately, it dead-stopped at that point. According to the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), whose projections of state and national high school graduates are the most widely cited, the number of graduates nationally began to decline slowly after 2010-11 and would fall continuously through 2013-14, a reflection of the small decline in the number of births in the U.S.

in the mid-1990s. Though not a particularly steep drop—the number of graduates declined by just six percent—the recovery period will take years. The total number of high school graduates in the U.S. is not projected to reach 2010-11 levels again until 2023-24. In the intervening years, barring significant changes in the rate of high school completion, we should expect little change in the total number of high school graduates, and thus little change in the total market for traditional-age college students.²

The shallow, bathtub-like trajectory projected for high school graduates follows nearly two decades of uninterrupted annual growth, to which most colleges and universities across the country became accustomed. The expanding traditional-age market provided ready opportunities to either maintain or increase undergraduate enrollment at many institutions. But the trend line has reversed, or at least stopped its climb, and few institutions will be able to rely on population growth dividends to sustain or increase their enrollment—a change that will present different challenges in different parts of the country.

Changing Faces

The 2012 presidential election says much about the changing face of America. Mitt Romney captured 59 percent of the white vote in the 2012 presidential election.³ He garnered a 20 percentage point margin of victory over President Obama, likely among the largest percentage gaps ever for a single candidate among white voters. In any other election in American history that margin of victory among white voters surely would have propelled Romney to the Oval Office. But in 2012, he lost. And he lost handily, in both the Electoral College and the popular vote.

Though he lost the white vote by a wide margin, President Obama received 93 percent of the black vote, 71 percent of the Hispanic vote, and 73 percent of the Asian vote. Democrats had captured large percentages of the non-white vote in prior presidential elections, but the sub-populations were not large enough to swing the outcome. They

are now, and they will be for years and decades to come. Americans of color will represent as much as 30 percent of the electorate in the November 2016 election.⁴

The growing racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population, and its impact on politics, economics, and culture, should not come as a surprise. The trend toward increasing diversity has been building for years. Between 2000 and 2010, the nation's minority population⁵ increased by 29 percent, rising from nearly 87 million to 112 million. The number of white, non-Hispanic Americans grew by just one percent over the decade.⁶ Led by extraordinary growth in the Hispanic population, the non-white population in the U.S. has more than doubled numerically in the last thirty years. By 2010, people of color comprised 36 percent of the nation's total population, up from 31 percent in 2000 and just 20 percent in 1980.

The trend to increasing racial and ethnic diversity is not a blip on the demographic radar. It is long-term and likely permanent. The population of color in the United States is both younger and growing more rapidly than the white population. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that, for the first time in American history, more than half of the nation's population under age one was non-white, a sign of significant cultural and social change yet to come.⁷ Last year, young people of color made up more than 45 percent of all Americans under age 18 (compared to just 25 percent of those aged 45 and older).⁸

According to WICHE projections, all of the growth in high school graduates nationally between 2013 and 2023 will occur among young people of color.⁹ The number of white high school graduates will drop by more than eight percent over the ten-year period (it had already fallen by five percent in the prior ten-year period), while the number of graduates of color will collectively rise by nearly 19 percent. By 2023, graduates of color will represent nearly half of all high school graduates in the country, up from one-third in 2003. The trend will repeat itself in every region of the country. Young people of color will make up the majority of graduates in both the West (where they already

comprise a majority) and the South by 2023, and their share of all graduates will rise to 28 percent in the Midwest (up from 24 percent in 2013) and to 39 percent in the Northeast (up from 34 percent in 2013).

While the big numbers are interesting, it is more important to pay close attention to what is happening among sub-populations. The number of black high school graduates, who until 2008 made up the largest group of non-white graduates in the country, is expected to decline by six percent between 2013 and 2023 before essentially stabilizing. The number of American Indian or Alaskan Native graduates will grow slightly, but consistently will continue to represent only one percent of all high school graduates in the country.¹⁰

The most significant growth will occur among Asian and Hispanic students, with the lion's share of the change propelled by the continued explosive growth in the Hispanic population. Over the next ten years, the number of Asian high school graduates in the U.S. will grow by nearly 59,000, a gain of 33 percent. Their share of all graduates will rise from five percent in 2013 to eight percent by 2023. Significant as that change is, it will pale in comparison to the change among Hispanic graduates over the same period. Between 2013 and 2023, the number of Hispanic high school graduates nationally will explode, projected to rise by 188,000. By 2023, Hispanic graduates are expected to make up one-quarter of all high school graduates in the country, double their share at the beginning of the century. Hispanic students already make up the largest share of graduates of color. Their plurality will widen to a majority by 2019.

CSB and SJU

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University are subject to the full force of these trends. As the number of high school graduates rose in Minnesota and the nation, so too did our enrollment. Between fall 1994 and fall 2000, first-year-to-senior enrollment averaged 1,889 at the College of Saint Benedict and 1,682 at Saint John's University. By the

2006 to 2011 period, the peak years of demographic expansion, average enrollment had risen to 2,045 at Saint Benedict and 1,891 at Saint John's. The trend, however, also worked in reverse. Our enrollment has declined as the number of high school graduates has fallen. In fall 2015, undergraduate enrollment was nearly six percent lower at the College of Saint Benedict and eight percent lower at Saint John's University than it was in fall 2011. Simply meeting our enrollment goals has become more difficult.

But to look only at changes in total enrollment would miss a big part of the picture. The racial and ethnic composition of our student body also has changed dramatically in recent years. In fall 2005, the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University together enrolled 53 new entering students of color, who collectively represented less than five percent of all new students that year. Fast forward a decade and the change is striking. In fall 2015, we enrolled 190 new students of color, who comprised more than 1 in 5 new students—the highest number and proportion ever. Nothing suggests either that those numbers are temporary or even peaks. They will continue to rise as the nation's and the region's population changes.

As America's population continues to change, our understanding of the term "underrepresented" likely will change, too, at least as it relates to numeric racial and ethnic diversity. Students of color no longer represent a small numeric minority of all students, or even a minority at all in some places (like California, Texas, and Florida). Similar to the change in the electorate, the entire market for traditional-age college students is more racially and ethnically diverse than it ever has been. And it will become significantly more so. These are not changes occurring on the margin that require no more than fleeting or episodic or create-a-targeted-program attention. Diversity defines the new marketplace for higher education and new enrollment strategies must reflect that fact. Colleges and universities that do not figure how to enroll and retain the rising number of students of color not only will find it increasingly difficult to meet their enrollment goals, but also will put themselves at risk of becoming little more than social anachronisms.

The New Demography

The “new demography” reshaping the higher education landscape surely presents serious challenges in terms of both access and affordability. But to limit our understanding of the change only to its challenges or even to simple market imperatives overlooks the extraordinary opportunity it presents. At CSB and SJU, the changing racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of our students provides us with new opportunities to redefine the community experience, enrich the learning experience, and extend the Catholic, Benedictine, and pedagogical values we hold and profess. It allows us to return to the roots and values of our founding, when both institutions served a mostly immigrant population of a growing and changing nation. Our willingness to embrace the change, to move beyond the temple of our familiar, will produce positive effects well beyond the years we experience our students as undergraduates. In a time of extraordinary division in our country and in our culture, we at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University have a new opportunity to create opportunity and contribute to the fabric of a new community and a new common good. *Carpe diem.*

This narrative was drawn from Chapter Three of Jon McGee’s book, *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

Notes

1. All of the data on projections of high school graduates and the changing racial and ethnic characteristics of high school graduates comes from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Brian T. Prescott and Peace Bransberger. *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* (eighth edition). Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012. <http://www.wiche.edu/info/publications/knocking-8th/knocking-8th.pdf>.
2. Improvements in high school retention rates, particularly among lower-income students, for example, could

significantly influence the number of high school graduates as could immigration.

3. *New York Times*, President Exit Polls. Story available at <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls>. Accessed February 5, 2013.
4. “Slugging the way to the White House,” *The Economist: The World in 2016*, December 2015.
5. A term used by the Census Bureau that is inclusive of race and ethnicity. It includes all people who are non-white alone, Hispanic, or multiple race or ethnicity. The inverse would be white alone and non-Hispanic.
6. Karen R. Humes, Nicholas P. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez. *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010*. 2010 Census Briefs. U.S. Census Bureau, March 2011.
7. U.S. Census Bureau press release. *Most Children Younger than Age 1 are Minorities, Census Bureau Reports*. May 17, 2012. Accessed February 5, 2013, at <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-90.html>.
8. U.S. Census Bureau data. *Age and Sex Composition in the United States: 2011*. Accessed February 5, 2013 at <http://www.census.gov/population/age/data/2011comp.html>.
9. All data on projections of high school graduates by race and ethnicity derived from tables prepared by WICHE in their *Knocking on the College Door* report (2012). The data reflect public school graduates only.
10. Rates of high school completion differ, sometimes significantly, by race and ethnicity and family income. WICHE projections of high school graduates assume

that current rates of school progress and completion will continue. Clearly, changes in high school drop-out rates, up or down, could significantly change the number of high school graduates.

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