

In Just Two Decades, U.S. Drops From Second To Sixteenth In Percentage of Young Adults With A College Degree

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Across the past two decades, the U.S. has lost ground to many other nations in the percentage of ... [+]

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In the past two decades, the U.S. has fallen from 2nd to 16th compared to other countries in the percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 who've earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

That's one of hundreds of findings in [Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2021 Historical Trend Report](#), released on May 19 by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and the University of Pennsylvania Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (PennAHEAD).

The 2021 edition is the seventh in the current series, begun in 2015. The reports use multiple sources of existing data to present a large number of indicators about equity - or more to the point, inequity - in postsecondary enrollment, financial aid, and degree completion. While the focus of the report is on higher education in the United States, it also includes comparisons of postsecondary attainment across several countries over time.

And that leads us to the troubling decline in how the U.S. ranks in educational completion rates, based on data collected since 1991 by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) to compare educational attainment across the world. (The OECD counts what it calls Tertiary-type A degrees, which are roughly comparable to the BA/BS degree in the U.S. and Tertiary-type B degrees that correspond to the associate's degree in the U.S.)

In 2000, the U.S. ranked 2nd out of 30 countries in the percentage of adults ages 25-32 who had earned at least a bachelor's degree (at that time, 30% for the U.S.). Norway, with an attainment rate of 32%, was first.

By 2019, the U.S. had dropped to 16th out of the 45 countries in bachelor's degree attainment (with a 40% attainment rate). Ireland (63%) had the highest rate of bachelor's degree attainment among this age group.

Every country that ranked above the U.S. in 2019 (and reported data in both 2000 and 2019) had attainment rates for 25- to 34-year-olds **that were below** that of the U.S. in 2000. Those countries were Denmark, Poland, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Belgium, Greece, Finland, Ireland, United Kingdom, Iceland, Australia, Netherlands, and Korea.

How did this happen? Obviously, U.S. bachelor degree attainment didn't go in reverse. The answer is simple - other countries accelerated far faster than the U.S. For countries with higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment than the U.S. in 2019, the average rate of increase in attainment between 2000 and 2019 was 162%. In contrast, for the U.S., the percentage of adults 25 to 34 with at least a bachelor's degree increased by only 33% across the two decades.

Maybe the results would be different if we considered completion of the equivalent of associate's degrees along with bachelor's degrees. After all, there's been a lot of policy emphasis placed on the value of associate's degrees in terms of individuals' economic wellbeing. Actually - and sadly - the results are only marginally better.

In 2019, 50% of U.S. adults ages 25 to 34 had attained the equivalent of at least a 2-year or 4-year or above degree, ranking the nation 12th of 45 countries on this indicator. In 2000, the U.S. ranked 5th out of 30 countries on this measure.

Once again, the slippage was because other countries outpaced us. Between 2000 and 2019, the share of the U.S. population age 25 to 34 with an associate's or higher increased by 28%, moving up from 39% in 2000 to

50% in 2019. But the U.S. was outgunned. The average rate of this attainment among all OECD countries rose from 28% in 2000 to 48% in 2019, a 71% increase, more than twice the rate for the U.S.

Assuming one views these figures with alarm, what's to blame for the U.S.'s relative decline? There are plenty of culprits at which fingers can be pointed. The ups and downs of state appropriations for public institutions [have been shown to harm degree completion](#). Problems of college affordability, enormous levels of student loan debt and the persisting inaccessibility of college to low-income, first-generation and minority students are well-documented by numerous reports, including this newest release by the Pell Institute. Higher education institutions themselves also have their own responsibility, given the disappointing degree-completion rates many of them achieve.

And there's one other influence that cannot be ignored. It's the repeated claims by some pundits that higher education is simply not worth it, that good jobs don't require postsecondary education, that going to college may be a waste of time and money. That kind of refrain - coupled with the real problems that higher education must address - eventually takes a toll. Citizens become more skeptical of higher education, they lose trust in it, and they begin to turn away from it. Second to sixteenth in two decades is one of the results.