

# Jump in US college enrollment highest in 40 years

By HOPE YEN (AP) – June 16, 2010

WASHINGTON — The nation's colleges are attracting record numbers of new students as more Hispanics finish high school and young adults opt to pursue a higher education rather than languish in a weak job market.

A study released Wednesday by the Pew Research Center highlights the growing diversity in higher education amid debate over the role of race in college admissions and controversy over Arizona's new ban on ethnic studies in public schools.

Newly released government figures show that freshman enrollment surged 6 percent in 2008 to a record 2.6 million, mostly due to rising minority enrollment. That is the highest increase since 1968 during the height of the Vietnam War, when young adults who attended college could avoid the military draft.

Almost three-quarters of the freshman increases in 2008 were minorities, of which the largest share was Hispanics.

The enrollment increases were clustered mostly at community colleges, trade schools, and large public universities, which tend to have more open admissions policies and charge less tuition. Still, the gains in minorities were seen at almost all levels of higher education, with white enrollment dipping to 53 percent at community colleges and 62 percent at four-year colleges.

Preliminary government data show freshman college enrollment continued rising in 2009 to fresh highs, but demographic breakdowns were not yet available.

"The nation is moving beyond whether minorities have access to post-secondary education," said Richard Fry, a senior researcher at Pew who wrote the report. "The question increasingly is not 'which youth go beyond high school?' but 'who goes where?'"

California, the District of Columbia, Arizona, Alabama and Nevada had the largest freshman enrollment increases in 2008, with gains ranging from 11 percent to 21 percent. States registering declines included Minnesota, Nebraska, Delaware and Oklahoma, which dropped as much as 5 percent.

Demographers say much of the college enrollment gains reflect the nation's rapidly changing demographics, in which 43 percent of all students in K-12 are now minority. But the recession, too, is adding to the increases as more high school graduates — primarily Hispanics — enroll immediately in college rather than take their chances in the labor force.

Among the findings:

\_ Freshman enrollment of Hispanics in higher education jumped by 15 percent in 2008, compared to 8 percent for blacks, 6 percent for Asians and 3 percent for whites.

\_ The share of 18- to 24-year-olds who earned a high school diploma reached an all-time high of 85 percent, up from 84 percent in 2007. Among Asians, the number was 92 percent, whites 90 percent, blacks 79 percent and Hispanics 70 percent.

\_Colleges showing the largest freshmen increases included Fresno City College in California, jumping 448 percent to 2,998 students; Arizona State University, rising 21 percent to 8,458; and American Public University System in West Virginia, increasing 332 percent to 121 students.

The findings add to the burgeoning debate over the role of race in America amid a steady rise in the minority population that is expected to make them the new American majority by mid-century. In Arizona, Gov. Jan Brewer last month signed a measure banning ethnic studies courses in public schools if they serve to promote racial solidarity or are designed primarily for students of a particular race.

Several minority groups have praised Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan, who as solicitor general authorized the filing of a brief by the Justice Department defending the constitutionality of the University of Texas' affirmative action program that considers race in undergraduate admissions. The case, still pending, is expected to be appealed to the Supreme Court.

Fry noted that minority enrollment appeared to be concentrated in the "basic tiers" of higher education, such as community colleges and trade schools. It is not clear whether gains occurred in more selective four-year colleges, which often use affirmative action to promote diversity.

In addition, while Hispanics have seen recent gains in college enrollment, they still lag overall. Hispanics make up roughly 12 percent of full-time undergraduate and graduate students, compared to their 16 percent representation in the total U.S. population.

"These findings are only half reassuring," Fry said. "Many Hispanic teens still are not graduating high school, and the high school gains may not be sustained when the teen labor market revives. It also remains to be seen how many of these additional minority freshmen will actually complete degrees."

Pew, an independent research group, based its findings on 2008 data from the Census Bureau and the Education Department. The figures for "white" refer to those whites who are not of Hispanic ethnicity.

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