



Degree Attainment and the Globalized Workforce

by Julie Lancaster

Who in the world holds college degrees? The reality is that a very small percent of the population has earned a higher education degree. The vast majority of workers worldwide hold jobs that do not require college degrees, such as manual laborers and factory workers. Low wages and less ideal working conditions reflect a lack of degree.

Looking at a 99-year history as reported by the US Bureau of the Census, the number of Americans (25-years and older) holding college degrees has been on a steady incline from 2.7 to 29.5% (1910–2009). Approximately one-third of all Americans hold a college degree.

To better understand the gravity of the difference education makes regarding lifetime earnings, a 2005 report by the College Board, indicates that, “The typical bachelor’s degree recipient can expect to earn about 73 percent more over a 40-year working life than the typical high school graduate earns over the same time period.” Evidentially, it is well worth it financially to earn a degree.

But the scale is tilted. For example, in 2003, consider the figures for Americans holding Bachelor’s degrees or higher when sorted by ethnicity:

Asian	49.8%
Caucasian	27.6%
African American	17.3%
Native American	11.5%
Hispanic	11.4%

But a more granular look at ethnicity and degree attainment shows more interesting detail. For example, at CollegeAmerica’s main Arizona campus in Flagstaff, the report looks much different. Of associate’s and bachelor’s degrees candidates in 2009/2010, the breakdown was 70 percent Native American, 14 percent Caucasian, 8.5 percent unknown, 6.5 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent African American. This private sector career college is filling a much needed niche for minorities within its region. By contrast, while it is located less than five miles away, Northern Arizona University’s Native American enrollment stands at seven percent.

Nichol Esquivel, is attending College America in Flagstaff. As head-of-household and a single parent, Esquivel—who is part-Navajo—is well on her way to becoming the first in her family to graduate from college. “I came to college because I wanted to provide the best life for my son,” she said. “Growing up, my mom never had the time or money for anything extracurricular for me; I want to enroll my son in karate or Boy Scouts if he wants, and I want to be able to be there cheering on the sidelines instead of working my fingers to the bone for pennies.” Nichol has earned her Associate’s degree in Medical Specialties and is midway through her Bachelor’s classes. Her future has promise.

In 2011, the CollegeAmerica-Flagstaff student body consists of 39 percent first generation college students, a dynamic of



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pioneering a change of course for generations to come. Historically, children of college graduates are much more likely to go to college. In a 2005 national study of 263,710 freshmen at four-year colleges, only 16 percent of them were first-generation college students. This exemplifies the fact that 74 percent followed the way already paved by parents or grandparents seeking broader opportunities and a brighter future.

Additionally, 61 percent of CollegeAmerica-Flagstaff students are parents; 31 percent are single parents. Compare this with the Department of Education findings that nationally, 13 percent of college students are single parents. The difference is resonating; fast track programs with flexible day and night programs and established resources for non-traditional

students give necessary support for parents returning to school.

Additionally, there is one outstanding benefit that most students don't realize when they are signing admissions papers. Once entering the world of higher education, people are likely to live seven years longer than less educated peers. According to one Harvard study, not only will scholars live longer, but the life expectancy gap widens between those with at least some college education and those with none.

College degrees should not be a rarity for any segment of our nation's population; the benefits of college education reach far beyond just the classroom or the workplace, and stretch out over many years. Our educational landscape is morphing; the diversity accompanying this change demands successful infrastructure for minorities and non-traditional students.

To obtain a better life and a longer life is the goal of all Americans—and the road to success just may be paved with textbooks. ■

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