ISSUE BRIEF

UTAH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A new look at Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap

Preface: A call for systemwide equity and action

Last year, the Utah System of Higher Education published an issue brief on Utah's Opportunity Gap. The [2019 report](1) focused on the long-range impacts of shifting demographics within Utah's population on enrollments and completions within USHE. What the report failed to do is address the responsibility of our System to evaluate the ways in which our System policies and procedures create structural barriers to the access and success of students, faculty, and staff who belong to underrepresented and marginalized groups.

In May, the world witnessed the senseless death of George Floyd at the hands of police, once again exhibiting the country's struggle with racial inequities. Frontline activists and engaged global citizens rallied together to bring increased attention and scrutiny to many troubling social issues, exacerbated and magnified by structural inequities impacting underrepresented communities. Further emphasizing these ongoing racial and ethnic disparities within the nation's systems has been the coronavirus pandemic, which the world has been grappling with since March. These current events ignited worldwide protests and opened up a national dialogue regarding systemic racism, growing structural disparities, and the institutions that have historically propagated them.

Utah's colleges and universities have long been engaged on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. They have been driving institutional change through equity initiatives that mitigate structural barriers and promote equity for many decades. System-level work and direction in these critical areas has been lacking and, now more than ever, we recognize our position and responsibility to continue facilitating dialogue and prompting action between state leaders, researchers, and industry experts on educational equity gaps to ensure all Utahns can access higher education and contribute to the overall state workforce.

The newly formed Utah Board of Higher Education is committed to working in concert with all 16 public higher education institutions in the state, to intervene in widening opportunity gaps for students, faculty, and staff who belong to underrepresented groups.

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[1] Utah System of Higher Education, *Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap 2019,* https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Utahs-Growing-Opportunity-Gap-Final_updated-template.pdf

Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap through a new lens

The call for structural change is not just driven by singular events, and the data included in this report suggests a need for action. The Board and System leadership will work in the coming months to develop an equity lens to better understand, identify, and address systemic equity issues to guide them in establishing priorities, setting goals, revising System policies, and governing USHE (more on this later). At the outset of their work, it is imperative to provide new context and reframing to such a critical topic.

With improved understanding surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion, the data from the [2019 report on Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap](#)[2] has been reframed to better reflect the structural inequities impacting our state's communities, especially those who belong to underrepresented groups, as they access and complete higher education.

The impact of dismissing growing structural barriers on Utah's postsecondary educational attainment

State demographers and research experts suggest Utah's population will become increasingly diverse in the coming decades. [By 2065, the percentage of people of color in Utah, ages 18-35, will nearly double.](#)[3] There is already a postsecondary education enrollment and completion gap represented through racial and ethnic disparities at colleges and universities within USHE. If intentional and significant changes are not made to address growing disparities within USHE, the enrollment gap at Utah's postsecondary colleges and universities will continue to increase as the population grows, and our communities will continue to be negatively impacted.

Should the System forego a critical review of its policies, procedures, and norms, the same pattern can be expected for completion rates, resulting in Utah students missing out on an estimated 290,000 degrees and awards from 2020-2065. This will have negative ramifications on Utah's economy and workforce, as well as the communities and students who enter the higher education landscape with hopes of upward mobility.

Method

This study was reframed to look at the long-range impact of shifting demographics within Utah's population on enrollments and completions if systemic and structural barriers within USHE are not addressed.

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[2] Utah System of Higher Education, *Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap 2019*, https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Utahs-Growing-Opportunity-Gap-Final_updated-template.pdf
[3] Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, *Race/Ethnicity Projections*, https://gardner.utah.edu/demographics/projections/

This analysis utilizes Utah [population projections provided by the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, which contains yearly estimates broken down by age, gender, and ethnicity from 2010 to 2065](#).[4] The population age range of 18-35 is the focus of this analysis. This analysis also uses computed ratios of estimated state populations to USHE student enrollments, and the ratio of USHE student enrollment to USHE graduates, to estimate future postsecondary educational attainment in Utah. These ratios were used to estimate future enrollments and completions. Ratios were computed for each combination of age, gender, and race and ethnicity category. Detail data were then summarized for the entire 18-35 population.

Findings

Demographic shifts

In 2018, people of color made up 23%-25% of the 18-35 age population in Utah. By 2065, it is projected that the percentage of people of color in this age range will increase to make up 39-41% of the population.

Population trends of Utahns ages 18-35
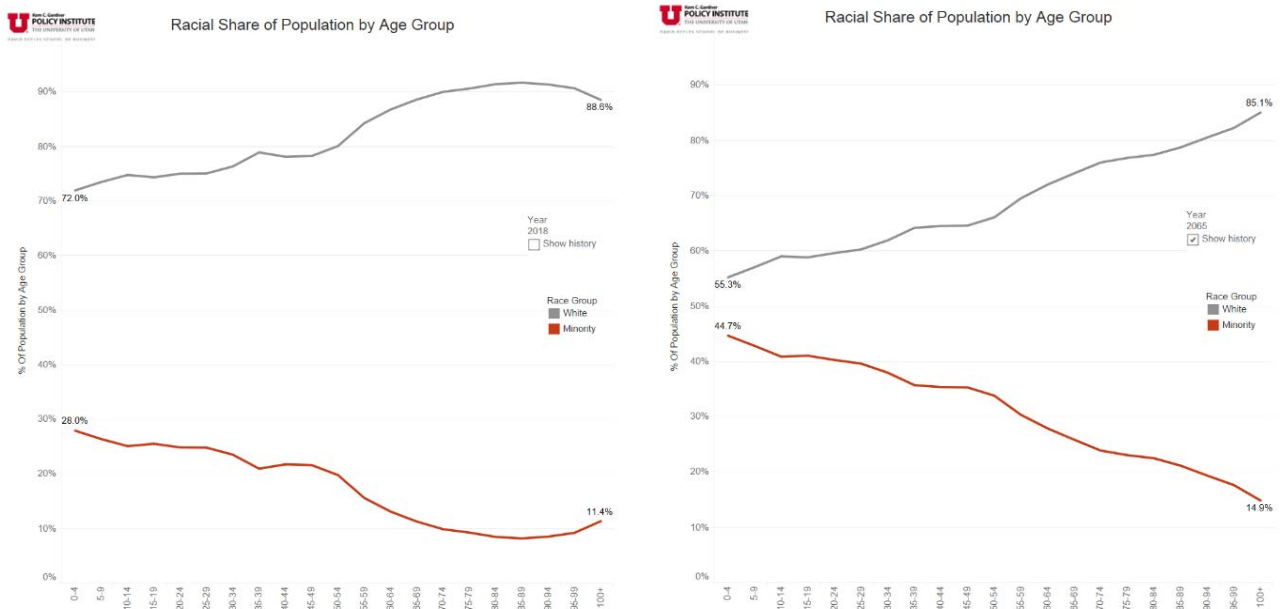
Impact on enrollments

When comparing Utah college enrollment numbers of Utahns ages 18 to 35, enrollment rates of people of color are as much as 40% below that of white individuals.

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[4] Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, *Race/Ethnicity Projections*, https://gardner.utah.edu/demographics/projections/

Young men of color are the population least represented attending USHE institutions. Male Native Americans (8.52%), male Hispanics (8.72%), and male Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders (9.74%) represent three of the lowest participation rates at USHE institutions. Only female, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders had a lower participation rate (8.48%).

Percent of state population (18-35) enrolled at a USHE institution, 2018

Race/Ethnicity	Ages 18-35		
	Female	Male	Total
White	14.56%	15.61%	15.09%
Hispanic	10.45%	8.72%	9.59%
Asian	13.43%	13.01%	13.22%
Black	14.57%	11.43%	13.00%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	8.48%	9.74%	9.11%
Native American	10.98%	8.52%	9.75%
Two or More	14.66%	14.87%	14.76%
Total Average	12.45%	11.70%	12.07%

Growing structural disparities are also highlighted when reviewing enrollment of high school students one year after graduation, as reflected in USHE's report, *Utah High School Students Transition to College.*[5] Utah's statewide average enrollment rate for students one year out of high school is 46%. When ranked by school district, Park City School District tops the list with 68% of students enrolling in college within one year of high school graduation. Conversely, rural school districts tend to exhibit lower-than-average first-year fall enrollment rates, with Uintah school district enrolling only 30% of their senior class. Urban school districts like Ogden similarly find themselves at the bottom of the list, with only 34% of their senior class enrolling in college within one year of high school graduation.

It should be noted that in Utah, measures of college enrollment within one year of high school graduation tend to underestimate the true picture of college attendance because of the ecclesiastical missionary service system of Utah's predominant religion.[6] Variations in religious mission activity of recent high school graduates could explain some of the variation between school districts. However, it is

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[5] Utah System of Higher Education, *Utah High School Students Transition to College 2020,* https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/issue_brief/2020/2018_HS_Feedback_IB.pdf
[6] Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study, Adults in Utah*, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/utah/

likely the case that socioeconomic status, marginalization, and structural inequities also play a role in whether a high school graduate attends college.

Utah's white population, ages 18-35, enrolled in college at an average rate of 15.1% over the last five years. Due to widening structural inequities, people of color in Utah enrolled at an average rate of 11.6% over the same period.

If disparities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status persist, then the gap between the number of Utah residents expected to enroll at a USHE institution and the number that actually enroll will continue to increase unless the System intervenes.
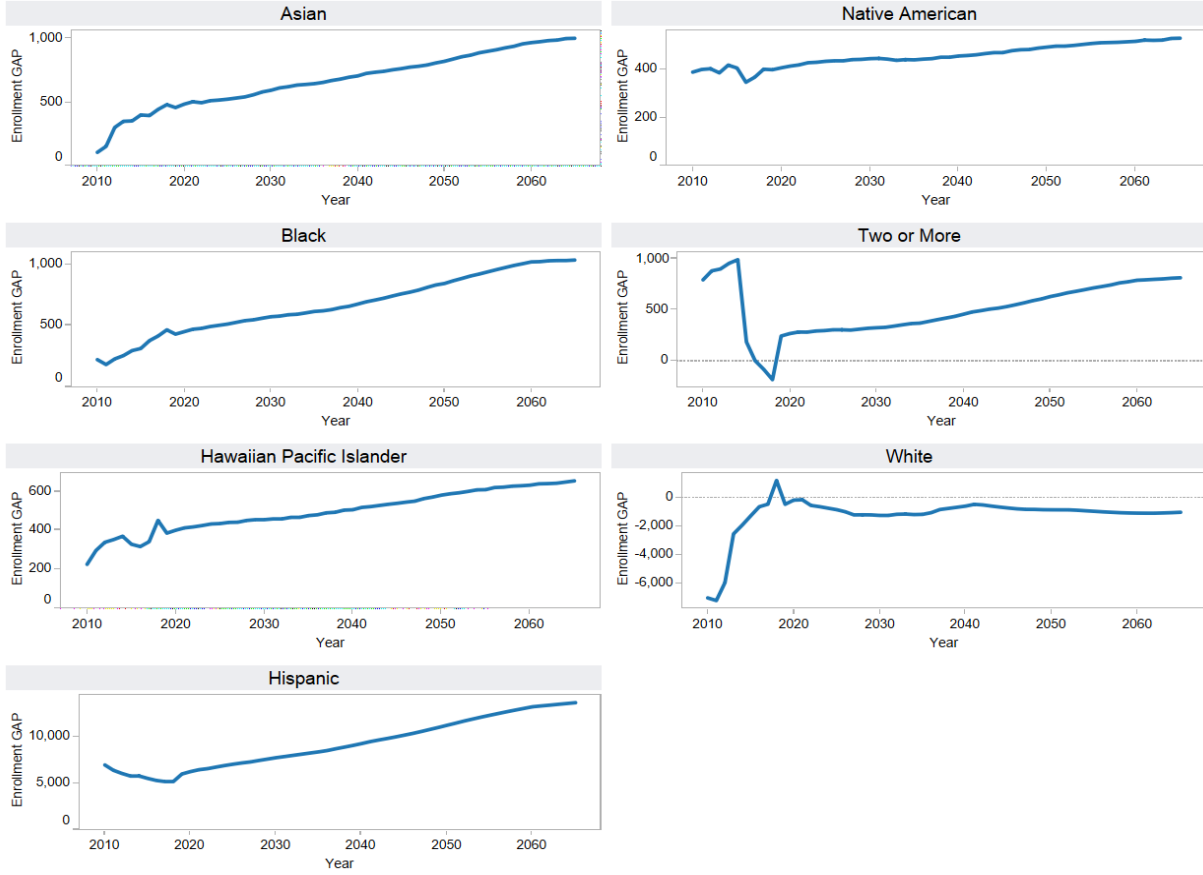
Estimated Enrollment Gap - Utah Population 18-35
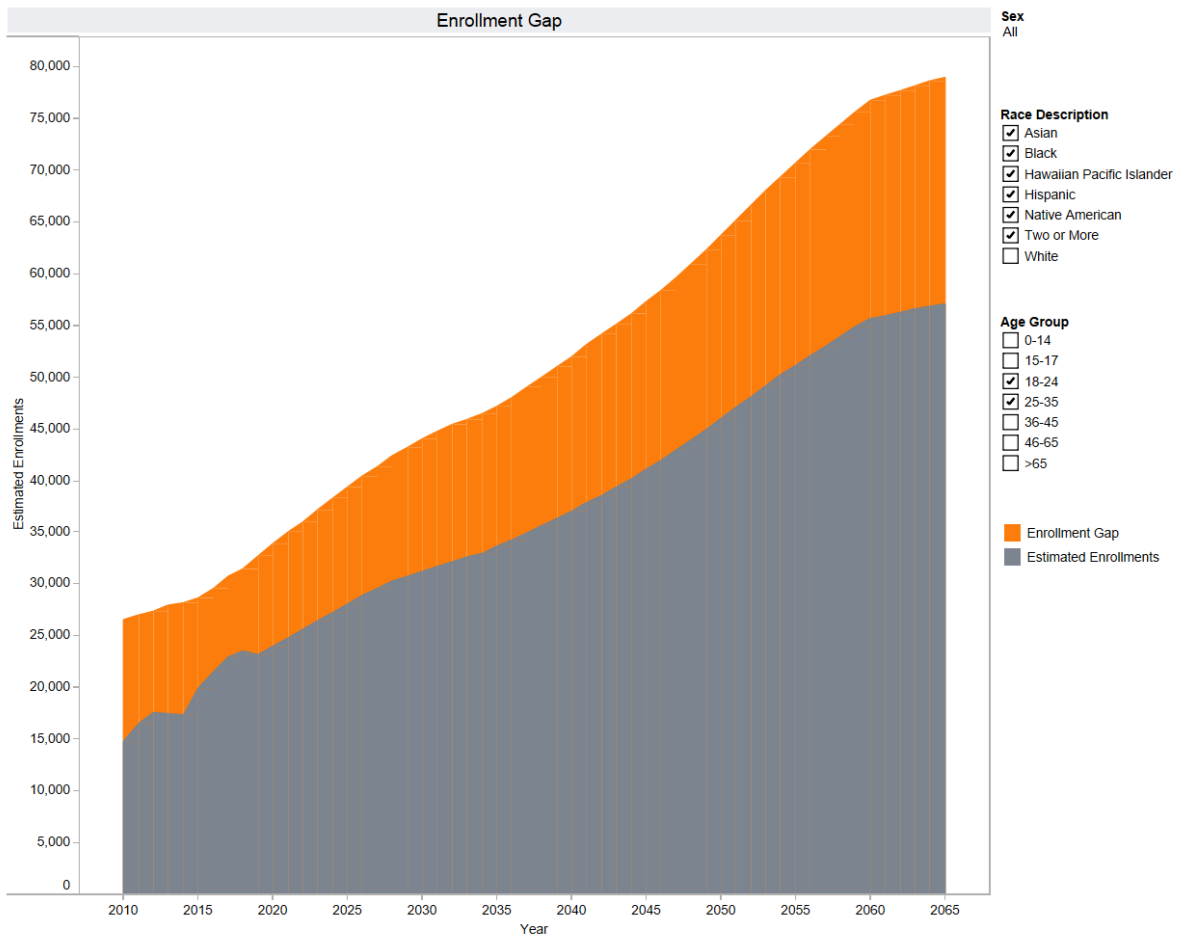
The estimated enrollment gaps also increase when data is disaggregated by gender and ethnicity, and the age range is expanded to 15-35 to take into account potential high school students participating in Concurrent Enrollment.
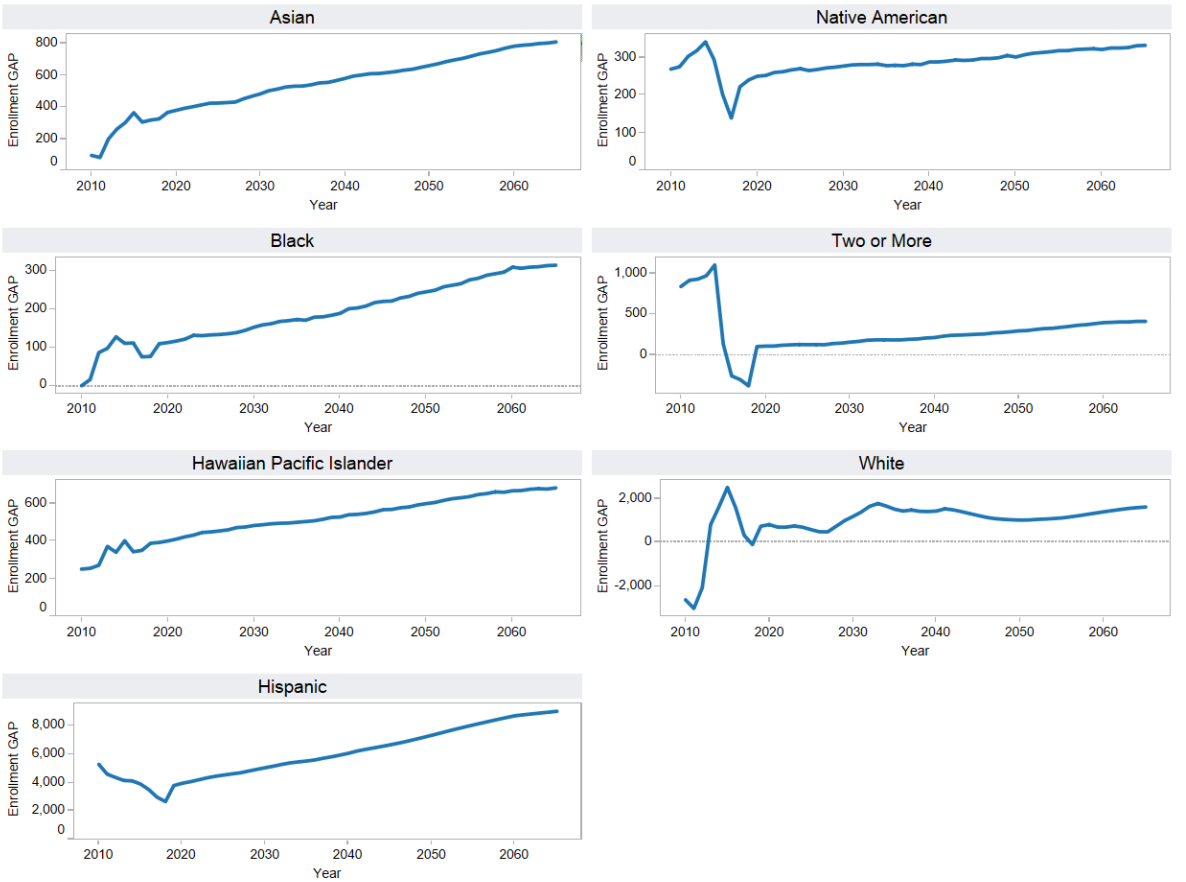
Enrollment Gaps Utah Male Population by Ethnicity

Enrollment Gap: Males age 15-35

Enrollment Gaps Utah Female Population by Ethnicity

Enrollment Gap: Females age 15-35

Impact on completions

Similar gaps exist in the completion rates of students at USHE institutions. When comparing college completion rates, postsecondary educational attainment of people of color is as much as 35% below that of white students. Due to structural barriers, for the past five years, white USHE students completed at an average rate of 32.1%. Over the same time, USHE students of color completed at an average rate of 25.7%.

For completions, the "two or more" race/ethnicity category had the highest completion rate at 33.64% while the Hawaiian/Pacific Islander population exhibited the lowest completion rate at 20.79% — a 13-percentage point difference. Women outpaced men in completion, with 27.93% of the enrolled population completing an award each year, compared to 25.25% for men.

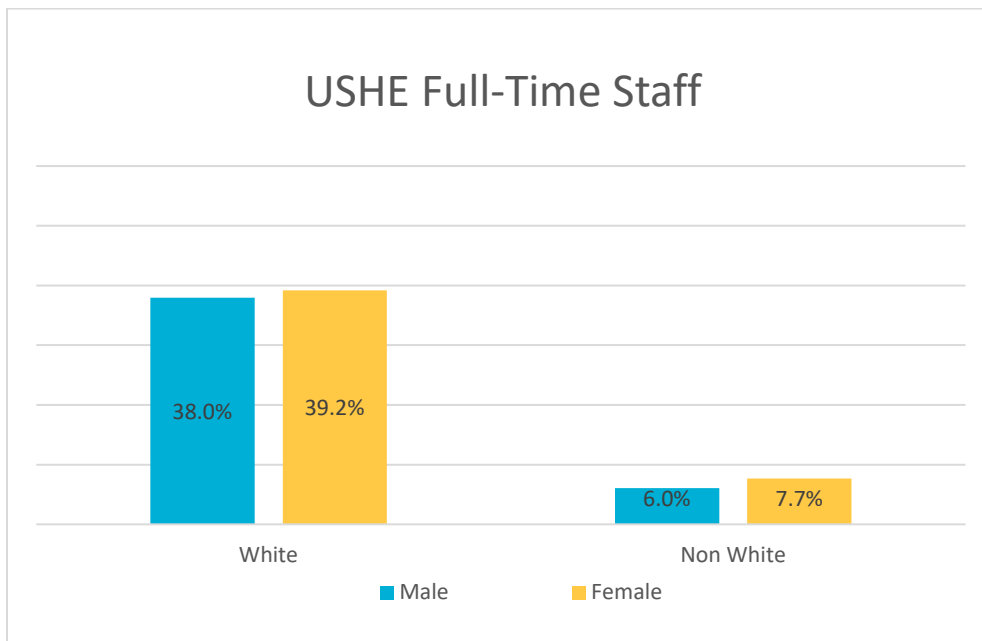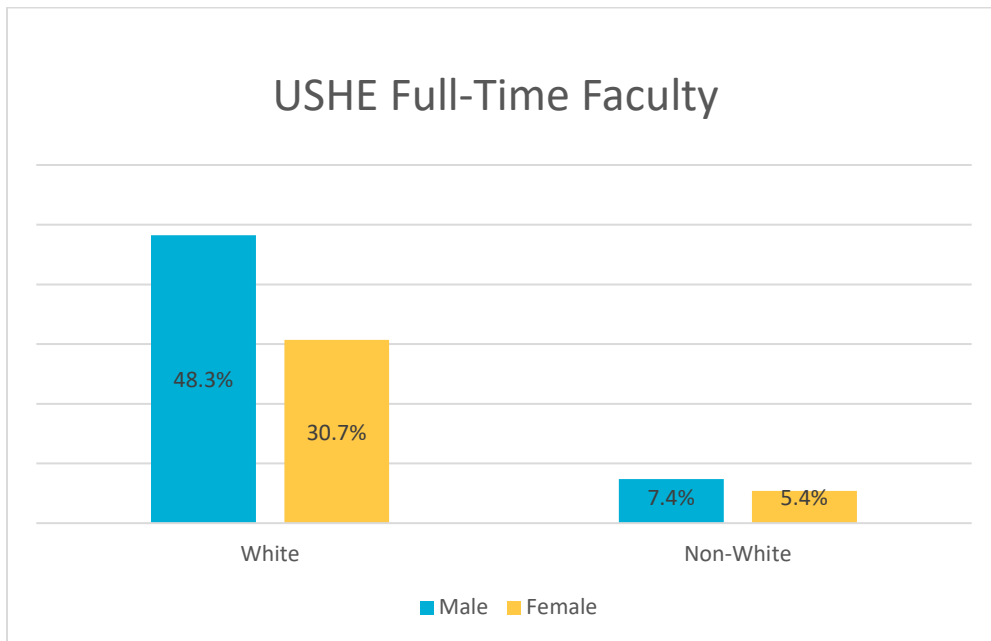*Estimated average completion rates of enrolled populations each year*

Race/Ethnicity	Ages 18-35		
	Female	Male	Total
White	33.94%	30.32%	32.13%
Hispanic	23.22%	20.98%	22.10%
Asian	31.17%	30.77%	30.97%
Black	24.77%	21.23%	23.00%
Hawaiian Pacific Islander	22.30%	19.28%	20.79%
Native American	26.24%	20.72%	23.48%
Two or More	33.84%	33.44%	33.64%
Total Average	27.93%	25.25%	26.59%

Similar to the enrollment trends, if current completion trends go unchecked, then as the state's population demographics shift, the gap between potential completions and actual completions will become increasingly large.

Growing Completion Gap in Non-white Populations
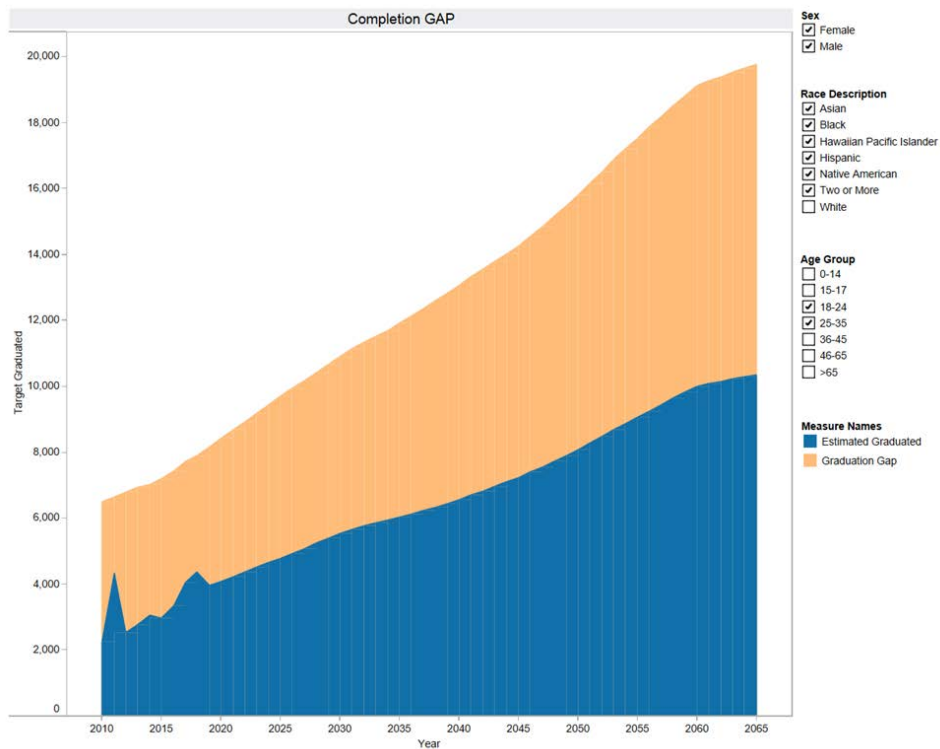
Data on employment at the state's degree-granting postsecondary public institutions suggest an issue of underrepresentation as well. As of November 2019, only 19.8% of full-time faculty positions and 18.9% of full-time staff positions were held by individuals of color.

USHE Full-Time Faculty

White: Male 48.3%, Female 30.7%
Non-White: Male 7.4%, Female 5.4%

■ Male ■ Female

USHE Full-Time Staff

White: Male 38.0%, Female 39.2%
Non White: Male 6.0%, Female 7.7%

■ Male ■ Female

Further research is needed to understand both the extent of underrepresentation relative to the local demographic composition, as well as to what degree the employment patterns reflect structural higher education barriers, which could be preventing people of color from the opportunity of gaining further education and training needed for entry to campus positions.

The absence of representative staff and faculty also greatly impacts underrepresented student persistence, and completion outcomes. It is critical that institutions review recruitment, retention, persistence, and

hiring practices and policies for staff and faculty. The same trend holds true in the recruitment, retention, persistence, and application processes for institutional student leadership by race, ethnicity, and gender.

Key Points

Disparities in enrollment and completion rates based on race, ethnicity, and gender will have long-term implications for the State of Utah as population demographics shift and inequities are not addressed. Over time, the estimated percent of total Utah residents, ages 18-35, who enroll at a USHE institution will decrease by approximately 1.6% and the percent of total residents, ages 18-35, who complete a certificate or degree each year will decrease by 0.1% between 2010 and 2065.

Utah's population is projected to grow to over 3.5 million by 2065. The potential impact of maintaining the current trajectory within higher education would result in 22,377 lost enrollments and 11,265 lost completions in the year 2065 alone.

Due to systemic inequity and a failure to intentionally address structural barriers in enrollment and completion based on race and ethnicity, it is estimated that underrepresented student populations in Utah have missed out on the opportunity for approximately 36,000 additional degrees and awards between the 2010 and 2019 academic years.

> *If nothing is done to address growing educational equity disparities, Utah community members will miss out on an estimated 290,000 degrees and awards between 2020 and 2065.*

The Need for an Equity Lens within Higher Education

The newly established Utah Board of Higher Education and combined System, including all public universities, community colleges, and technical colleges in Utah, has a rare opportunity to truly change the course for many Utahns, helping to bolster Utah's workforce and economy, and most importantly, to open up pathways for its community members to pursue a better quality of life.

The efforts of those working on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, to address inequities within underrepresented communities must be successful for the benefit of our students. For the Board to effectively eliminate inequities at a systemwide level, it must begin its work with a new equity lens that helps identify the systems, structures, policies, procedures, and existing higher education cultural norms that sustain models for racial and socioeconomic disparities. The new equity lens will provide a common language, definitions, and metrics to confront structural deficiencies. It will guide higher education leaders to address the root problems of inequality within higher education to ensure meaningful action is taken for Utah's future prosperity.

To that end, it is anticipated that the Board will adopt a resolution at their August Board meeting on equity, diversity, and inclusion to advance equitable systemic change within USHE by addressing needed changes through the following structural ways:

1. Establish a diversity, equity, and inclusion workgroup to cultivate collaboration and coordination among the Board and System leadership. The workgroup members shall include the Board executive committee, the Commissioner and his staff, institutional representatives, and community organizations. The workgroup will meet quarterly, starting in September, to update its members on each standing committee's progress toward statewide goals and to align ongoing efforts to advance equitable systemic change. Additionally, the workgroup will be responsible for creating opportunities to hear from underrepresented students and communities to guide its work.

2. Create an equity lens framework for higher education leaders, in collaboration with institutional Chief Diversity Officers, community leaders, and System leadership, to better understand, identify, and address systemic equity issues as they establish priorities, set goals, revise System policies, and govern the Utah System of Higher Education. A draft of this document will be shared at the October Board meeting.

3. Ensure statewide attainment and performance goals include measures designed to close statewide inequities and are part of the System strategic plan. By the November 20 Board meeting, each standing committee will develop a set of aligned priorities, specific to their assigned areas of responsibility, that are equity-driven, measurable, and focused on creating meaningful progress toward removing statewide inequities.

RESOLUTION TO ADVANCE EQUITABLE SYSTEMIC CHANGE WITHIN
THE UTAH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

WHEREAS, recent racial and social justice movements around the globe have amplified calls to evaluate, reform, and eradicate systemic racism and structural equity disparities; and

WHEREAS, Utah continues to see significant gaps in postsecondary enrollment and completion by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status; and

WHEREAS, without a critical examination of System policies, procedures, and structures, these gaps will grow over time, resulting in Utah community members missing out on earning thousands of transformative higher education credentials in coming decades; and

WHEREAS, the Utah Board of Higher Education recognizes that underrepresented student groups face intractable structural barriers as they work to access, persist, and complete higher education; and

WHEREAS, the Utah Board of Higher Education is committed to joining with all 16 public higher education institutions across the state to intervene in widening higher education enrollment and completion disparities for underrepresented students; and

WHEREAS, the Board recognizes that intervening in systemic disparities requires issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and student safety be at the forefront of all its work; and

WHEREAS, the Board acknowledges its position and responsibility to continue facilitating dialogue and coordinated actions between state leaders, education leaders, researchers, and industry experts to eliminate educational equity gaps and to ensure all Utahns can access and complete higher education;

THEREFORE, the Utah Board of Higher Education resolves to advance equitable systemic change through the following priorities:

1. Establish a diversity, equity, and inclusion workgroup to cultivate collaboration and coordination among the Board and System leadership. The workgroup members shall include the Board executive committee, the Commissioner and his staff, institutional representatives, and community organizations. The workgroup will meet quarterly, starting in September, to update its members on each standing committee's progress toward statewide goals and to align ongoing efforts to advance equitable systemic change. Additionally, the workgroup will be responsible for creating opportunities to hear from underrepresented students and communities to guide its work.

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3. Ensure statewide attainment and performance goals include measures designed to close statewide inequities and are part of the System strategic plan. By the November 20 Board meeting, each standing committee will develop a set of aligned priorities, specific to their assigned areas of responsibility, that are equity-driven, measurable, and focused on creating meaningful progress toward removing statewide inequities.

Dated this 21st day of August 2020.

Harris H. Simmons, Chair
Utah Board of Higher Education

Dave R. Woolstenhulme
Commissioner of Higher Education