

## Chapter 5

# Higher Education for Whom? Higher Education for What?

### A Critical Quantitative Analysis of the Expansion of Access to Higher Education in the United States

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter provides a critical quantitative examination of issues related to increasing access to higher education in the United States. The chapter first offers insights into the utility of using empirical evidence within a critical, theoretical framework to unpack underlying issues of expanding accessibility. Specifically, critical theory is used to excavate the limits of liberal approaches to expanding higher education through increasing access, coupled with empirical analysis of disparities in college completion rates. That is, while increasing access is important, access is hardly enough to decrease social and economic gaps. Issues of hegemony within higher education are examined through an examination of which students, despite increased access to higher education broadly, have access to specific types of post-secondary educational experiences.*

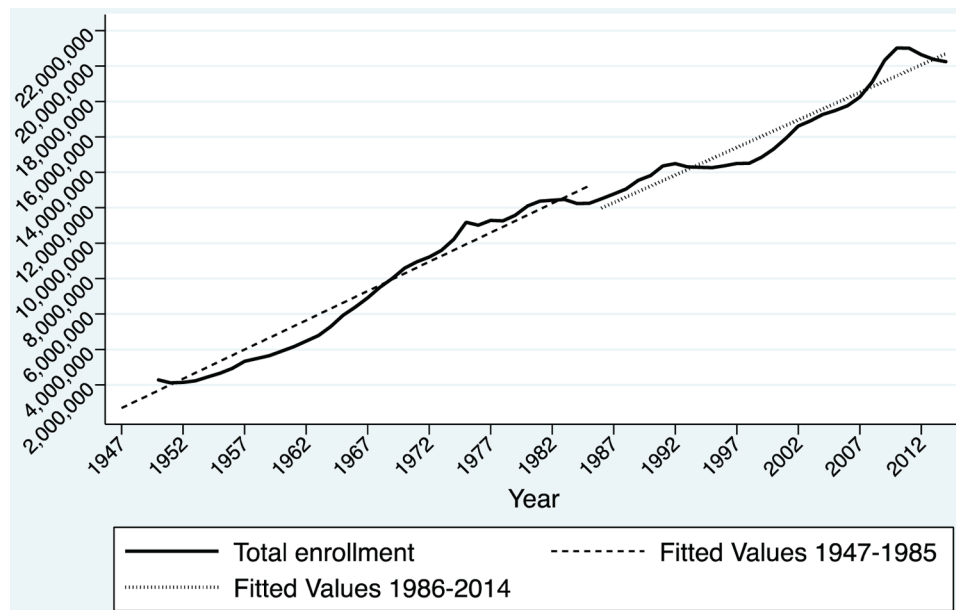
#### **INTRODUCTION**

It is undeniable that access to higher education has expanded rapidly over the past few decades. Attendance statistics show that enrollments have increased by 34% from 1994-2008 and are projected to increase another 17% between 2008-2019 for an estimated total of 22.4 million college students in the U.S. by 2019 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). The sharpest rate of increase in enrollments occurred between the post-war era of the 1950s and the 1980s, and while enrollments are still increasing, the rate at which they are increasing has slowed (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Figure 1 shows the long-term trends in postsecondary enrollments in the United States. Along with the total enrollments, the figure shows

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2665-0.ch005

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Figure 1. United States postsecondary enrollment totals (1947-2014)



(U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015)

regression lines for the time periods 1947-1985 and 1986-2014. While the total enrollments do continue increasing after the mid-1980s, the trend line for this period has distinctly different slope from that of the post-war boom in college enrollments.

The data shown in Figure 1 confirm the notion that access to higher education has increased in the United States over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, what is hidden in this figure is a deeper understanding of which kinds of students' enrollments have gone up, at which types of institutions, for what kinds of degrees, and at what costs. These questions are important to examine in light of persistent inequalities within higher education in the U.S., despite the rapid expanse of access.

Some persistent inequalities include increased stratification of high-SES students into highly-selective institutions with high graduation rates and low-SES students into less-selective institutions with lower graduation rates (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Further, postsecondary institutions are stratified along racial and ethnic groups as well, with the majority of Black / African-American and Hispanic / Latina/o students attending less selective 4-year institutions and 2-year institutions. In fact, on average, more than 30% of White students and nearly 50% of Asian students earn a baccalaureate degree while only 18% of Black students and 12% of Hispanic students do so (Russell, 2006). Additionally, Carnevale & Strhol's (2010) analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data revealed that only 7% of high school students from the bottom quartile in terms of socio-economic status (SES) go on to earn a baccalaureate degree (p.73). Lastly, in terms of costs of higher education, further inequalities exist in the United States. For example, Winston (1999) found that students in the top 10% of institutions in terms of institutional wealth pay approximately \$0.20 for every dollar spent on them by the institution, but students in the poorest 10% of higher education institutions pay \$0.78 for every dollar spent on them by the institu-

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