Despite the controversies surrounding the quality and direction of American education, the United States remains one of the most highly educated nations in the world. According to Grace Kena et al., in *The Condition of Education 2016* (May 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016144.pdf), between 1995 and 2015 the percentage of people aged 25 to 29 years who had received a high school diploma rose from 87% to 91%. The percentage in that age group that had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 25% to 36%. Among people in the 25-to-29 age group, females (39%) were more likely than males (32%) to have completed a bachelor’s or higher degree in 2015. (See Figure 6.1.)

### THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

During the 1980s there was growing concern that Americans were falling behind other developed countries in educational achievement. In response, the National Education Goals Panel was created in 1989 to advance several national objectives, including increasing the high school graduation rate and competency in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. Although a task force recommended the panel’s reauthorization in 1999, the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act closed the panel in 2002.

The NCLB changed the laws defining and regulating the federal government’s role in kindergarten through 12th-grade education. The law is based on four basic education reform principles. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in “Four Pillars of NCLB” (July 1, 2004, https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html), these principles are:

- Stronger accountability for results
- Increased flexibility and local control
- Expanded options for parents
- An emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work

### Accountability

Under the NCLB, schools are required to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” toward statewide proficiency goals, including closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Schools that do not demonstrate progress face corrective action and restructuring measures. Progress reports are public, so parents can remain informed about their school and school district. Schools that make or exceed yearly targets are eligible for awards.

The accountability outlined under the NCLB is measured through standards testing, and federal financing of schools depends on the results of these mandated tests. The testing provisions of the NCLB are the subject of debate. Advocates view testing as a means to ensure that all children are held to the same high standards. They argue that many young people have passed through school without acquiring basic reading and math skills and are ill equipped to function in an information-oriented economy. By contrast, Jennifer L. Jennings and Douglas Lee Lauen note in “Accountability, Inequality, and Achievement: The Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Multiple Measures of Student Learning” (*RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 5, September 2016) that several studies have found that accountability systems improve students’ scores on state and national tests, and others have found small but positive effects of No Child Left Behind on measures of student achievement other than state test scores. Jennings and Lauen analyzed test scores of sixth- through eighth-grade students in the Houston Independent School District between 2003 and 2007 and find higher scores on math state tests, but lower math and reading scores on audit tests that are not tied to the accountability system. The researchers explain that although they
cannot determine why gains in state test scores are not reflected in audit test scores, this finding should prompt further investigation about “how instruction changes when schools face accountability pressure, why gains vary across different measures of achievement, and why gains vary across different subgroups of students.”

In “What Parents Still Do Not Know about No Child Left Behind and Why It Matters” (Journal of Education Policy, vol. 31, no. 3, 2016), Lesley E. Lavery reports that 10 years after NCLB was instituted, more than half of the nation’s 100,000 public schools failed to make sufficient progress toward state standards and one-third of schools have repeatedly failed to meet NCLB targets. Lavery notes that nearly half of Americans do not support NCLB and cites the fact that “few families have taken advantage of the policy’s purported opportunities through formally designated channels such as school choice and tutoring services” as further evidence of flagging enthusiasm for the policy.

The Common Core State Standards

Until the second decade of the 21st century, states established their own academic standards, and their standards varied widely. The Common Core standards aim to ensure that all students in public schools are similarly educated when they graduate from high school. Common Core writing assignments emphasize evidence-based arguments rather than personal narratives like “how I spent my summer vacation.” Math standards are intended to help students understand mathematical principles rather than simply memorizing ways to solve problems.

Released in 2010, the Common Core state standards (CCSS) detail what students in kindergarten through 12th grade should know in language arts and mathematics at the end of each grade. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contributed about $200 million to fund the development, evaluation, implementation, and promotion of the CCSS. More than 40 states adopted the CCSS, a consistent set of K–12 standards, created by the states, that outline what students should know at each grade level in math and English.

Stephen Sawchuk observes in “What to Make of the Debate over Common Core” (Smithsonian.com, September 4, 2013) that Common Core standards require students to think critically about what they are learning and to analyze and apply it rather than simply committing material to memory. Sawchuk explains that the standards aim to equip students completing high school to “succeed in college or entry-level jobs without remediation.”
STANDARDS HAVE SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS. CCSS advocates believe common standards and consistent benchmarks will ensure equitable education and that “raising the bar” will improve students’ academic performance. In “An Examination of the Debate Surrounding Core Curriculum State Standards in American Education” (Paideia, vol. 3, no. 20, Spring 2016), Kristen Henry explains that supporters maintain that CCSS effectively address curriculum variation, promote educational equity by ensuring that all students benefit from a uniform curriculum, and enable accurate comparisons between state school systems. Proponents also believe that CCSS will reduce the percentage of postsecondary students requiring remedial coursework in college and prepare them to compete in the global economy.

Critics of CCSS think their adoption is an example of federal government overreach that takes control away from the states, local communities, and families. (It is important to remember that the federal government did not develop the CCSS but does support them.) Detractors also cite the high costs of the program and observe that even though states’ participation in CCSS is voluntary, the financial incentives to participate are so great that states with inadequate education budgets cannot afford to pass up the opportunity. Critics also think that funding for CCSS should be more equitably distributed to address other issues that influence academic performance such as poverty, food insecurity, health care, and access to books.

Interestingly, the CCSS has supporters and detractors on both sides of the aisle. President Donald Trump (1946–) and the U.S. senators Ted Cruz (1970–; R-TX), Rand Paul (1963–; R-KY), and Marco Rubio (1971–; R-FL) oppose CCSS, along with Republican governors Scott Walker of Wisconsin (1967–) and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana (1971–). Conservative groups such as the Republican National Committee, the Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation also oppose the CCSS. Other Republicans, however, including the former Florida governor Jeb Bush (1953–) and Ohio governor John Kasich (1952–), support CCSS. Many Democrats, including former president Barack Obama (1961–) and former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton (1947–), support CCSS, as does the Democratic-affiliated Center for American Progress.

Liberal detractors view CCSS as a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to education that does not reflect how teachers teach in the classroom and how students learn. For example, Diane Ravitch, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and research professor of education at New York University, is skeptical about the standards. In “Everything You Need to Know about Common Core—Ravitch” (WashingtonPost.com, January 18, 2014), Ravitch observes that it will be at least a decade before the results of the adoption of these standards can be analyzed, but she is not optimistic that the outcomes will be universally favorable. She concludes, “I believe in standards, but they must not be rigid, inflexible, and prescriptive. Teachers must have the flexibility to tailor standards to meet the students in their classrooms, the students who can’t read English, the students who are two grade levels behind, the students who are homeless, the students who just don’t get it and just don’t care, the students who frequently miss class. Standards alone cannot produce a miraculous transformation.”

Testing Assesses Student Performance

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) levels define what students should know and do at different grade levels, and looking at changes in test scores over time is one way to gauge the performance of the education system. In The Condition of Education 2016, Kena et al. describe how the NAEP assesses student performance in reading at grades 4, 8, and 12 in public and private schools and compares test results over time. NAEP reading scores range from 0 to 500.

Among fourth-grade students, the average reading scores for white (232), African American (206), Hispanic (208), and Asian/Pacific Islander students (239) and the percent of students performing at the “proficient” level were higher in 2015 (36%) than in 1992 (29%). Among eighth-grade students in 2015, average reading scores for white (274), African American (248), and Hispanic (253) students were lower than the scores in 2013 (276, 250, and 256, respectively), but still higher than they were in 1992. Similarly, the percentage of eighth graders considered proficient increased from 29% in 1992 to 34% in 2015.

Another way to evaluate the U.S. educational system is to compare how its students perform to the performance of students in other countries. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science literacy. Kena et al. compare the average results of U.S. teens on the 2012 PISA against the results of teens from other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which have highly developed economies and democratic governments. They report that on the 2012 PISA, U.S. teens achieved an average reading score of 498. This was close to the overall OECD average of 496 and was lower than the average score of 19 educational systems in other OECD countries. The U.S. average score of 481 in mathematics literacy was below the OECD average score of 494 and was lower than the average score in 29 educational systems of the OECD countries. The average score of U.S. teens in science literacy was 497, compared with an average among OECD countries of 501. U.S. teens were outperformed by 22 educational systems in OECD countries in science literacy.
The Voucher Controversy

Many people believe that problems such as large class sizes, inadequate teacher training, and lack of computers and supplies in public schools are unsolvable within the current public school system. One solution touted during the early 1990s was the school voucher system: the government would provide a certain amount of money each year to parents in the form of a voucher to enroll their children at the schools of their choice, either public or private. School vouchers became a highly polarized issue, with strong opinions both for and against the idea.

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers’ union in the country, objected to school vouchers, arguing that voucher programs would divert money from the public education system and make existing problems worse. The union declared that giving money to parents who choose to send their child to a religious or parochial school is unconstitutional. Furthermore, the NEA and other voucher opponents claimed there was little evidence to support the idea that voucher programs lead to better educational outcomes. For example, in Keeping Informed about School Vouchers: A Review of Major Developments and Research (July 2011, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522161.pdf), Alexandra Usher and Nancy Kober of the Center on Education Policy conclude that a decade of research reveals “that vouchers have had no clear positive effect on student academic achievement, and mixed outcomes for students overall.”

Voucher supporters maintain that parents should be able to choose the best educational environments for their children. They argue that vouchers give everyone, not just the wealthy or middle class, an opportunity for a better education for their children in private schools. They also believe that making the educational system a free-market enterprise, in which parents may choose which school their children will attend, would force the public education system to provide a higher standard of education to compete.


Public School Choice: No Child Left Behind and Charter Schools

In lieu of a voucher program, the NCLB offered a public-school choice program. Parents of students enrolled in “failing” public schools were allowed to move their children to a better-performing public or charter school. Local school districts were required to provide this choice and provide students with transportation to the alternative school.

The NCLB also expanded the creation and use of charter schools. Public charter schools are funded by government money and run by a management group under an agreement, or charter, with the state that exempts it from many state or local regulations that govern most public schools. In return for these exemptions and funding, the school must meet certain standards. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools estimates in “The Public Charter Schools Dashboard” (2016, http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2016) that there were 6,440 charter schools, including 642 new schools, operating during the 2013–14 school year.

In “A Meta-analysis of the Literature on the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement” (Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, Spring 2016 Conference, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566972.pdf), Julian R. Betts and Y. Emily Tang of the University of California, San Diego, reviewed research to determine whether charter schools produce higher academic achievement than traditional public schools. Betts and Tang find no significant differences for reading achievement but find that charter schools produce higher achievement gains in math compared with public schools. They also note that “A tiny but growing literature on non-achievement outcomes suggests positive influences of charter schools on educational attainment and behavioral outcomes.”

RACE TO THE TOP

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which was signed into law by President Obama in February 2009, included $4.4 billion for a new program called the Race to the Top Fund. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in “Race to the Top Program: Executive Summary” (November 2009, https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf), the program was “designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform.” The program awarded grants to states that developed educational reform plans that could accomplish four key objectives:

- Prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace
- Measure student growth and success to help teachers improve instruction
- Recruit and retain the best teachers
- Help the lowest-achieving schools succeed

In “Fundamental Change: Innovation in America’s Schools under Race to the Top” (November 2015, https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/racetimefinalrptfull.pdf), the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education analyzes the impact of the program and notes positive trends such as higher graduation rates and higher rates of participation and success in advanced placement (AP) courses. (See Figure 6.2.)
Participating states made progress toward their goals, which included improving relationships between states and districts, improving communication between teachers, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders, and adoption of higher academic standards.

THE COST OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The average annual expenditure per student in the public-school system in constant 2012–13 dollars rose from $8,459 per pupil in school year (SY) 1989–90 to $11,230 per pupil in SY 2014–15. (See Table 6.1.) Each year, when the federal budget is determined by Congress, the debate over funding for public education is fierce. Public school officials and teachers stress the importance of investing in the public education system, arguing that more money will provide more teachers, educational materials, and (eventually) a better education to students. They point to school buildings in need of repair, and classes that meet in hallways and other cramped areas.
because of space constraints. Opponents of increasing public school funding suggest that more money does not create a better education—better teachers do. To support their argument, they point to the increase in spending per pupil while some measures of academic achievement remain low.

**PREPRIMARY SCHOOL**

**Preprimary Growth**

Participating in early childhood programs such as nursery school, Head Start, prekindergarten, and kindergarten helps prepare children for the academic challenges...

The percentage of all children aged three to five years enrolled in preprimary programs also increased substantially between 1965 and 2010. In 1965, 27.1% of three- to five-year-olds were enrolled in nursery school or kindergarten. Snyder and de Brey report that by 2013, 60.3% of three- to five-year-olds were enrolled in full-day and 39.7% in part-day programs.

Preschool enrollment rates are correlated with parents’ educational attainment. In 2014 the enrollment rate of children in preprimary programs whose parents had not earned a high school diploma was 28%. (See Figure 6.3.) The enrollment rate of children whose parents had a high school diploma or equivalent was 32%, for those whose parents had advanced beyond high school to vocational/technical training or some college it was 35%, for those whose parents had an associate’s degree it was 38%, for those whose parents had a bachelor’s degree it was 43%, and for those whose parents had any graduate or professional school it was 49%. These percentages likely reflect three things: parents with higher educational levels are more likely to continue working after becoming parents, they are better able to pay for preprimary programs, and they value the educational benefits of preprimary programs for their children.

**Head Start**

The Head Start program, which was established as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, is one of the most durable and successful federal programs for low-income and at-risk children. Directed by the Administration for Children and Families, Head Start aims to improve the social competence, learning skills, health, and nutrition of children from low-income households, so they can begin school on a more level footing with children from higher-income households. Regulations require that 90% of children enrolled in Head Start be from low-income households.

nearly 1 million children were served by Head Start programs. Of the children and families served, 43% were white, 29% were African American, 10% were multiracial, 4% were Native American or Alaskan Native, 2% were Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 13% were of an unspecified or other race. In addition, 38% were of Hispanic ethnicity. A significant portion (12%) of enrolled children had disabilities, including developmental disabilities, health impairments, visual or hearing impairments, emotional disturbances, speech and language impairments, orthopedic handicaps, and learning disabilities.

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL Enrollment

All U.S. states require students to attend school through at least the age of 16 years; therefore, preprimary, elementary, and secondary school enrollments reflect the number of births over a specified period. Because of the baby boom following World War II (1939–1945), school enrollment grew rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s, when those children reached school age. Elementary enrollment reached a then-record high in 1969, as did high school enrollment in 1971.

During the late 1960s the birth rate began to decline, resulting in steadily falling school enrollment. An echo effect occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when those born during the baby boom began their own families. This echo effect triggered an increase in school enrollment starting in the mid-1980s. In 1985 public elementary and secondary school enrollment increased for the first time since 1971. It continued to increase in the following years. Kena et al. report that total public school enrollment reached 50 million in 2013 and is projected to increase to 51.4 million in 2025–26. (See Figure 6.4.)

Private Schools

Enrollment in public schools far surpasses enrollment in private schools. The NCES indicates in “Private School Enrollment” (May 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgc.asp) that the proportion of students enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools decreased to 10% in 2013–14 from 12% in 1995–96 and is expected to decrease to 9% in 2025–26.


Kena et al. report that the numbers of students enrolled in conservative Christian (707,000) and affiliated religious

FIGURE 6.4

Actual and projected public school enrollment 2003–04 through 2025–26

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Actual Enrollment (in millions)</th>
<th>Projected Enrollment (in millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003–04</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013–14</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–18</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020–21</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025–26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(565,000) schools in 2013–14 were lower than in 2003–04, whereas the 758,000 students enrolled in unaffiliated religious schools (schools with a religious orientation that are not classified as Catholic or conservative Christian) represented an increase in enrollment from 2003–04.

Dropping Out

**DROP OUT RATES.** Status dropouts are people aged 16 to 24 years who have not finished high school and are not enrolled in school. Kena et al. report that status dropout rates decreased from 1990, when 12% of young people were status dropouts, to 2014, when 6.5% were status dropouts. In 2014 the Hispanic status dropout rate, 10.6%, was considerably higher than that of non-Hispanic African Americans (7.4%) or non-Hispanic whites (5.2%). (See Figure 6.5.)

Dropout rates also vary greatly according to family income. In 2014 nearly 12% of people aged 16 to 24 years who were from families that had the lowest quartile incomes (the lowest 25% of incomes) had dropped out of school. (See Figure 6.6.) This was four times the dropout rate (2.8%) of 16- to 24-year-olds whose families had the highest quartile incomes.

**RETURNING TO SCHOOL OR GETTING AN ALTERNATIVE DIPLOMA.** The decision to drop out of high school does not necessarily mean the end of a young person’s education. Many former students return to school to get their diploma or to take the test necessary to obtain an alternative credential or degree, such as a general equivalency diploma (GED). The GED Testing Service reports in *2013 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test* (2014, http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/5b49fc887db0c075da20a68b17d313cd.pdf) that in 2013, 560,000 people passed GED tests. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of test takers cited an educational reason for pursuing the certification; many people who earn a GED continue their education by earning associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced degrees.

Special Populations

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.** In 1976 Congress passed the Education of the Handicapped Act, which required schools to develop programs for children with

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**FIGURE 6.5**

 Dropout rates of students aged 16–24, by race and ethnicity, 1990–2014

Note: The “status dropout rate” is the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in prisons, persons in the military, and other persons not living in households. Data for all races include other racial/ethnic categories not separately shown. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.

disabilities. Formerly, parents of many students with disabilities had few options other than institutionalization or nursing care. The Education of the Handicapped Act required that children with disabilities be placed in the “least restrictive environment,” which led to increased efforts to educate them in regular classrooms (known as mainstreaming). The law defined handicapped as children who were intellectually disabled, hard of hearing or deaf, orthopedically impaired, speech- and language-impaired, visually impaired, seriously emotionally disturbed, or otherwise health-impaired. It also included children with specific learning disabilities who require special education and related services.

In 1990 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed. This reauthorized and expanded the earlier Education of the Handicapped Act. It added autism and traumatic brain injury to the list of disabilities covered by the law, and amendments added in 1992 and 1997 increased coverage for infants and toddlers and for children with attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The law required public school systems to develop an Individualized Education Program for each child with disabilities, reflecting the needs of individual students. In December 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush (1946–), which reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and brought it in line with the provisions of the NCLB.

Because of legislation that enforces their rights, more children with disabilities have been served in public schools. Between SY 1990–91 and SY 2004–05 enrollment of students with disabilities grew from 4.7 million (11% of total public school enrollment) to 6.7 million (14% of total public school enrollment). In 2013–14, the number of students served fell to 6.5 million (13% of total public school enrollment). Of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, about one-third (35%) had a specific learning disability and one-fifth (21%) had a speech or language impairment. (See Figure 6.7.)

**HOMELESS CHILDREN.** Homelessness harms children in many ways, including hindering their ability to attend and succeed in school. Homeless children have difficulty with transportation to school, maintaining necessary documents, and attaining privacy needed for homework, sleep, and interaction with parents. Compared with children who are poor but housed, homeless children miss more days of school, more often repeat a grade, and are more often put into special education classes.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 required in Title VII, subtitle B, that each state

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**FIGURE 6.6**

Dropout rates of students aged 16–24, by income level, 1990–2014

provide “free, appropriate, public education” to homeless youth. The law further required that all states develop a plan to address the denial of access to education experienced by homeless children.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 went further to address inequities that affect homeless children in the public-school system. New guidance for states and school systems released by the U.S. Department of Education in April 2003 noted the main differences between the old and new programs:

- Homeless children may no longer be segregated in a separate program on the basis of their homeless status.
- Schools must immediately enroll homeless students even if they are missing some of the documentation normally required.
- Upon parental request, states and school districts must provide transportation for homeless children to the school they attended before they became homeless.
- School districts must designate a local liaison for homeless children and youths.

HOMESCHOOLED CHILDREN. Some parents choose to teach their children at home. Brian D. Ray of the NCES reports in “Research Facts on Homeschooling” (March 23, 2016, https://www.nleri.org/research/research-facts-on-homeschooling.html) that the most common motivation is to “customize or individualize the curriculum and learning environment for each child.” Ray reports that approximately 2.3 million children were homeschooled in 2014–15, up from 2 million in 2010.

States have differing requirements for parents who teach their children at home. According to the Home-school Legal Defense Association (2017, https://www.hslda.org/laws/default.asp), some states, such as Idaho and New Jersey, give parents the right to educate their children as they see fit, and impose only minor controls or none at all. Other states have stricter regulations. Highly regulated states, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, require parents to obtain and use approved curriculum, submit achievement test scores, or meet qualification requirements. Critics of homeschooling argue that parents may not be qualified to be teachers, but proponents believe that parents can gain teaching skills through experience, just as other teachers do.

HIGHER EDUCATION: OFF TO COLLEGE

Formal schooling beyond high school is increasingly viewed as a necessity, not only for young people’s
development but also for their economic success. Many parents consider supporting their children to attend college to be a financial priority and responsibility.

**College Entrance Examinations**

Most students who want to enter a college or university in the United States must take either the ACT (formerly American College Testing) or the SAT (once known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, then the Scholastic Assessment Test, now simply the SAT) as part of their admission requirements. The ACT is a curriculum-based achievement test, measuring proficiency in reading, math, English, and science, whereas the SAT is the primary admissions test to measure a student’s mathematical skills, verbal reasoning, and writing ability in a way intended to assess readiness for college. Students who take these tests usually plan to continue their education beyond high school; therefore, these tests do not profile all high school students.

**MORE STUDENTS ARE TAKING SAT AND ACT EXAMS, WITH MIXED RESULTS.** Performance on the SAT is measured on a scale of 200 to 800 for each of three sections, with the established average score being about 500 for each. According to the College Board, the SAT benchmark score of 1550 signals a 65% chance of achieving a B—average or higher during the first year of college, which research suggests is a strong predictor of college success and earning an undergraduate degree. Fewer than half (43%) of SAT test takers in the high school class of 2014 met the SAT benchmark. The College Board indicates that students who meet the benchmark are more likely than those who do not to enroll in a four-year college, 78% versus 46%, respectively. Similarly, 56% of students who meet the benchmark complete their degree within four years, compared with 27% of those who did not meet the benchmark.

The College Board notes in *Class of 2016 SAT Results* (September 2016, https://reports.collegeboard.org/sat-suite-program-results/class-of-2016-results) that in 2016 nearly 1.7 million students took the SAT. For the class of 2016, the average scores were 494 for reading, 508 for math, and 482 for writing.

According to ACT, Inc., in *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2016* (August 24, 2016, http://www.act.org/content/act/en/newsroom/act-scores-down-for-2016-us-grad-class-due-to-increased-percentage-of-students-tested.html), nearly 2.1 million students took the ACT in 2016, representing 64% of all high school graduates that year. The ACT’s four subject tests are scored on a scale of one to 36, with 36 being the highest possible score. ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are the scores for each test that indicate a student has at least a 50% chance of earning a B grade or higher, or a 75% chance of earning a C grade or higher, in first-year college courses in the subjects covered by that test. ACT research demonstrates that students meeting three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are very likely to be successful in first-year college courses. In 2016, 38% of the graduates tested met three benchmarks and just 34% did not meet any of the benchmarks, indicating that they may be very challenged in first-year college courses.

**DO TEST SCORES ACCURATELY PREDICT ACADEMIC SUCCESS?** Although the College Board and ACT, Inc., claim that exam scores correlate with academic success in college, some educators take issue with this assertion. Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown report in “SAT Reading Scores Hit a Four-Decade Low” (WashingtonPost.com, September 24, 2012) that there are concerns the SAT favors middle-class and wealthier students because average SAT test scores increase with each additional $20,000 in family income. They also observe that the disappointing 2012 test scores raise questions about the success of the decade-long NCLB effort to raise test scores. In “Beyond Correlations: Usefulness of High School GPA and Test Scores in Making College Admissions Decisions” (*Applied Measurement in Education*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2013), Richard Sawyer asserts that high school grade point average (GPA) is better than test scores in terms of predicting first-year college GPA but observes that in some instances such as predicting high levels of academic success, the ACT score may be better. Sawyer concludes that in most instances, using high school grades and ACT together has better predictive value than either alone.

**Projected Enrollment**

In the NCES publication *Projections of Education Statistics to 2023* (April 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015073.pdf), William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey project enrollment in institutions of higher education to rise through 2023. This is due not only to large numbers of students who are college age but also to the increasing number of people of all ages who seek advanced learning. Enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions is expected to increase 15% from 2012 to 2023.

**Community College Enrollment and the Great Recession**

During times of economic distress, people often turn to community colleges for job retraining or to learn different skills to pursue new careers. This trend was observed during the Great Recession of 2007–09. In “The Financial Crisis and College Enrollment: How Have Students and Their Families Responded?” (Jeffrey Brown and Caroline Hoxby, eds., *How the Great Recession Affected Higher Education*, 2013), Bridget Terry Long analyzes data from the Integrated Postsecondary
Education Data System, an annual survey of colleges and universities to determine how college attendance was influenced by the recession. Long finds that college attendance increased, especially in states hardest hit by unemployment and declining home values; however, it was part-time enrollment that increased while full-time enrollment actually decreased.

The American Association of Community Colleges reports in “2016 Community College Fact Sheet” (February 2016, http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf) that in 2016, nearly half of all undergraduate students attended community colleges. In 2016 there were 1,108 community colleges. The association estimates that more than 12 million students attended the nation’s community colleges during SY 2014–15. On average, students were 28 years of age, and 36% of students were the first generation in their family to attend college. In SY 2011–12, 22% of community college students worked full time, 17% were single parents, and 12% were students with disabilities.

**College Costs**

In 2016 paying for a college education, even at public four-year institutions, ranked as one of the costliest investments for families in the United States. The NCES indicates in “Fast Facts: Back to School Statistics” (August 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372) that in SY 2014–15 the average annual in-state cost at a public four-year institution, including tuition and room and board, was $16,188. For one year at a private, nonprofit four-year institution, the average cost for tuition and room and board was $41,970; at a private for-profit institution it was $23,372. The College Board reports in “Trends in College Prices” (2017, https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/average-published-undergraduate-charges-sector-2016-17#Key%20Points) that in SY 2016–17 average tuition and fees rose more for out-of-state students than for in-state students; the out-of-state premium increased by 4.3%, from $14,650 to $15,280. Average tuition and fees of $33,480 at private, nonprofit four-year institutions were $8,550 (26%) higher than the average public four-year out-of-state price, and average charges, including tuition, fees, and room and board of $45,370 in the private sector were $10,000 (22%) higher than the same costs at the out-of-state rate at a public four-year institution.

Because it is often difficult for students to accurately predict college costs and future indebtedness as a result of student loans, the U.S. Department of Education created a “College Scorecard” (2015, https://collegescorecard.ed.gov) that enables individuals to learn about a college’s “affordability and value,” so they can make more informed choices about which college to attend.

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS.** According to the NCES (2016, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=31), during the 2013–14 academic year, 85% of full-time undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions were receiving some type of financial aid (e.g., grants, loans, or work-study programs) from federal, state, institutional, or other sources to meet their educational expenses. More than half (56%) of full-time undergraduates received some form of federal assistance, and 49% received some type of nonfederal aid. (Some students received aid from both federal and nonfederal sources.) Federal assistance that goes directly to students includes Pell Grants (the annual maximum was increased to $5,815 for the 2016–17 academic year), the Stafford Student Loan Program (ranges from an annual maximum loan of $5,500 per year for dependent freshmen to $12,500 for independent juniors or seniors), and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (which range from $100 to $4,000 per year).

A national study of college students and parents conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs for the financial services company Sallie Mae, *How America Pays for College 2016* (2016, http://news.salliemae.com/files/doc_library/file/HowAmericaPaysforCollege2016FNL.pdf), finds that families with students spent an average of $23,688 on college in 2015–16. The average amount spent for students at four-year private colleges was $41,762; at four-year public colleges, it was $23,290.

Out-of-pocket contributions by families covered 41% of student costs for college in 2015–16; student loans were used to pay 13% of costs, and parent borrowing covered 7% of costs. About 70% of students relied on scholarship and grant funding, with about one-quarter using both. The majority (85%) of families filed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid; half of college students had scholarships, and 47% received grant money.

As reported in *How America Pays for College 2016*, two-thirds of families (67%) considered the price of a college when deciding where students should apply, and 44% waited to receive financial aid awards before choosing which school to attend. Thirty percent of students and 24% of parents said cost was “the primary driver for choosing the school they attend.” Many families took one or more steps to save money, such as choosing in-state schools with lower tuition (80%). Other strategies students used to reduce costs included living at home (49%), working (77%), reducing personal spending (62%), and earning their degrees in shorter periods than their programs typically take (27%). Others opted to live closer to home (61%) or at home/with relatives (54%), file for education tax credits (42%), live with a roommate (41%), or accelerate the pace of coursework (28%).

**AMERICAN OPPORTUNITY TAX CREDIT.** The Obama administration included the American Opportunity Tax
Credit in the ARRA. This credit allowed students or their parents to receive a federal income tax refund of up to $2,500 per year in college costs for the tax years 2009 through 2017. The full amount was available to Americans whose adjusted gross income was $80,000 or less ($160,000 or less for joint filers). The credit is reduced if a taxpayer’s modified adjusted gross income exceeds those amounts. Taxpayers whose modified adjusted gross income exceeds $90,000 ($180,000 for joint filers) cannot claim the credit.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND EARNINGS

The educational attainment of the U.S. population has risen steadily since the 1940s. In “Fast Facts: Degrees Conferred by Race and Sex” (2015, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72), the NCES states that from 2002 to 2013, educational attainment rates increased at all levels of certification and degrees. The number of certificates conferred grew 49%, from 646,000 in 2002 to 966,000 in 2013; associate’s degrees increased 59%, from 634,000 to 1 million, and 36% more bachelor’s degrees were granted (1.3 million to 1.8 million). Forty-five percent more master’s degrees (519,000 in 2002 to 752,000 in 2013) and 44% more doctorate level degrees (122,000 to 175,000) were awarded.

Education is a good investment because earning levels rise with increased education. In “Work-Life Earnings by Field of Degree and Occupation for People with a Bachelor’s Degree: 2011” (October 2012, https://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr11-04.pdf), Tiffany Julian of the U.S. Census Bureau observes that “educational attainment is by far the most important social characteristic for predicting earnings.”

Interestingly, Michael T. French et al. find that high school GPA not only predicts educational attainment but also earnings in adulthood. In “What You Do in High School Matters: High School GPA, Educational Attainment, and Labor Market Earnings as a Young Adult” (Eastern Economic Journal, May 19, 2014), French et al. find that students with higher high school GPAs consistently earned more than their peers with lower GPAs.

The Census Bureau calculates Synthetic Work-Life Earnings (SWE), which estimate the amount of money a person might expect to make over the course of a 40-year career. SWE estimates do not aim to predict individual earnings and make assumptions that may not be realistic for everyone (e.g., full-time, year-round employment for 40 years). The purpose of SWE estimates is to illustrate potential differences in earnings based on factors such as education and occupation over the course of a person’s work life. For example, the difference between earning $60,000 per year and $72,500 per year might not seem particularly large, but over a 40-year work life it is $500,000. Using SWE estimates helps show how relatively small differences in annual income add up over the course of a person’s work life.

Julian notes that educational attainment dramatically influences SWE. People who attain no more than an eighth-grade education have SWE of $936,000; for those who graduate from high school it increases to $1.4 million. An associate’s degree increases SWE to $1.8 million, and a bachelor’s degree brings it to $2.4 million. Individuals with a master’s degree have SWE of $2.8 million. Those with doctorate degrees have SWE of $3.5 million. Professional degrees such as law or medical degrees offer the highest SWE, at $4.2 million.