

U.S. Regions and 50 States in Perspective



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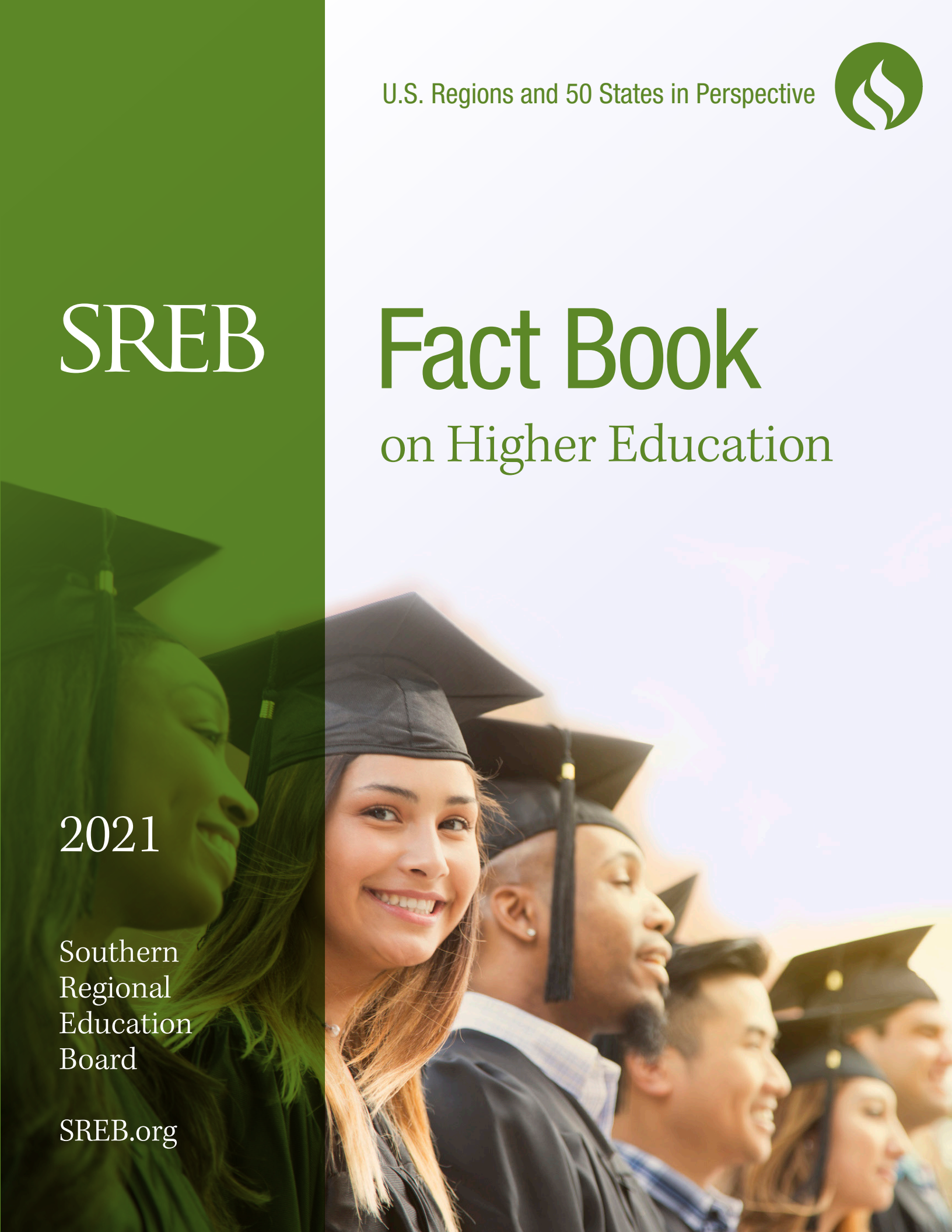
Fact Book

on Higher Education

2021

Southern
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The Student Success Imperative

Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce in an Uncertain Economy

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought shutdowns across the workforce and around the globe. Students returned home, colleges pivoted to online learning, and educators and state leaders adapted to let students learn despite quarantines, a sagging economy and digital disconnection.

Two years and several surges later, students are back in person, but the effects of the pandemic have shifted the landscape of higher education. As states continue to respond to a constantly changing, technologically advanced world, one thing is clear: Postsecondary education will be the engine that drives us as we recover from the pandemic.

State Economies Need Student Success

Nearly every SREB state has set a goal for raising its education attainment levels. The motivation to do so is based on (1) projected job growth for individuals with some postsecondary education or more, (2) earnings that tend to rise as the level of education increases, and (3) lower unemployment rates for individuals with higher levels of education during downturns in the economy.

Education attainment levels in the region have risen slowly, with 83 percent of adults ages 25 and older holding high school diplomas or GED credentials and 31 percent of adults ages 25 and older having a bachelor's degree or higher. One important factor has been increases in postsecondary graduation rates, which climbed from 2017 to 2019.

To raise postsecondary attainment levels still further, states must address perhaps the greatest barrier to access: affordability. The average annual cost of attendance for public four-year colleges for the 2019-20 academic year was \$21,000 (\$11,100 for public two-year colleges). The cost for a public, four-year institution for one year is 138 percent of the average annual household income for those in the lowest fifth of incomes, 31 percent for those in the middle fifth.

Rising student debt also discourages some students from pursuing a postsecondary degree or credential. In 2019, 54 percent of college graduates in the SREB region had outstanding college loans, with an average debt of \$28,200. Student debt disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic students, and this in turn affects the diversity rates of faculty members.

While the percentage of first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking freshmen in SREB states who took out loans decreased 2 percentage points between 2013-14 and 2018-19, the loan amounts increased \$400 on average during that time. "Students who have already accumulated high levels of debt from their undergraduate education may be less likely to pursue graduate school," says the SREB report *Student Debt Stifles Faculty Diversity: Comparing Debt Burdens in SREB's Doctoral Scholars Program and Nationwide*.

Two promising practices for improving affordability that have gained traction in SREB states are the use of free textbooks, or open education resources, as well as dual enrollment courses. College students can spend over \$1200 per academic year on textbooks, putting them out of reach for some students. OER thus lowers the total cost of attendance, as does dual enrollment (or dual credit) by allowing high school students to take college-level courses without paying the associated tuition and fees. Taking these courses might also reduce the amount of time and number of credits required to complete a degree or certificate, thus saving students still more.



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One threat to increasing education attainment levels across SREB states is the decline in college enrollment. Enrollment declines began before the pandemic but worsened when postsecondary institutions had to limit face-to-face interaction by shifting instruction online and requiring students to move out of residence halls. The slowing of population growth in the region has also negatively affected college enrollment.

With fewer students enrolling in college, states and postsecondary institutions face the challenge of helping more students succeed, particularly from populations that have had lower graduation rates. These populations include historically underserved student populations such as Black, Hispanic, rural and first-generation students.

Increasing faculty diversity can also have a positive impact on college student success. Research at one California university found that students whose professors share their cultural background are more likely to complete college and achieve other positive outcomes. Faculty diversity in the SREB region is growing, but slowly. Black and Hispanic faculty represented 14 percent of full-time faculty at public four-year colleges and 20 percent at public two-year institutions in 2019-20, up from 13 percent and 17 respectively in 2015-16. Similar percentage point increases were seen among Black and Hispanic full-time administrators. SREB's Doctoral Scholars Program is one example of a program designed to increase the diversity of postsecondary faculty by offering scholarships and mentors for doctoral candidates from underrepresented groups.

Education Attainment, Employment and Earnings

Higher education attainment levels are associated with higher earnings. Adults with bachelor's degrees in the U.S. earned an average of \$75,800 in 2019. Those with an associate degree averaged \$50,900, 20 percent more than individuals with only a high school diploma or GED. Benefits of higher earnings go not only to individuals but to the communities in which they live. Higher earnings lead to more tax revenue for local and state governments to support services for those who are unemployed or underemployed.

Jobs that require at least a postsecondary certificate are expected to demonstrate above-average growth rates. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that growth in total employment would slow to 4 percent from 2019 to 2029, while job growth for individuals with a postsecondary vocational certificate or an associate degree is expected to increase about 6 percent. Jobs requiring a bachelor's degree are projected to rise more than 6 percent.

As states and postsecondary institutions emerge into a new sense of normalcy as the global pandemic progresses, we have only begun to see what kind of effects it will have on higher education. From increases in virtual attendance to decreases in enrollment to the fallout from the Great Resignation, future editions of the *Fact Book* will show how the COVID-19 pandemic shapes the future of higher education and the workforce.

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