

Will American Workers be Ready For the 21st Century?



BY PETER HOEY—THE WASHINGTON POST

By C. Emily Feistritzer

WILL AMERICA produce enough competent workers to meet the nation's needs in the 21st century? That question lies at the heart of the most recent controversy over this country's educational system. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 21 million new workers will be needed by the year 2000, and the fastest growing occupations will be those that require the most educational preparation. *Workforce 2000*, a report from the Hudson Institute, predicts that the current average skill level of 21- to 25-year-olds is 40 percent lower than the skill-level that will be required of the new workers needed by that year. Yet between now and the year 2000, about 80 percent of new workers will be women and minorities, groups whose members traditionally have lagged in educational achievement. Businessmen, educators and politicians are all concerned.

The basis of the concern is the simple fact that the natural pool from which America has historically drawn new workers—young adults—is dwindling and becoming

disproportionately made up of minorities. Populations heretofore overlooked or ignored—because there were more than enough young white males to fill the nation's job demands—are now the focus of concern about the future workforce.

Labor Secretary Ann McLaughlin has said, "As America heads toward a more demanding skill-intensive economy, a literate, educated workforce is essential to our ability to compete in the world marketplace. Unless we act now, we will face a serious shortage of skilled workers." The National Alliance of Business has said, in a report called *The Fourth R: Workforce Readiness*, "As our society ages, and the birthrate drops, the number of young people available for work is rapidly declining. The dwindling numbers will require that we look for workers among groups of individuals previously ignored, and often considered less ready to work and less productive."

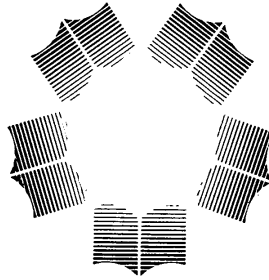
Lost amid the hand-wringing, however, are the tremendous gains that minorities and women have made; there are probably no groups for whom the gains are more striking. While still below those of white males, high-school graduation rates, enrollments in college and universities, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and employment rates have been rising fastest for minorities and women. Lost, too, are certain basic facts about the last 25 years that can provide some perspective as the nation prepares to enter the next century.

In 1965, less than a quarter of a century ago, the Civil Rights Act was passed. Before that time, most minorities and women—the populations upon which society will soon be so dependent—were not allowed, much less expected, to perform at high levels. In 1960, for example, just one in five (20.1 percent) of black adults had finished high school (as compared with only 40 percent of adults 25 years and older in the United States). About a fourth (23.8 percent) of black adults had less than five years of elementary schooling, and only 3.1 percent had a college degree.

By 1986, however, nearly two-thirds (62.3 percent) of black adults had completed four years of high school or more, as compared with 75 percent of U.S. adults. Almost 11 percent of black adults have at least one college degree. High school completion rates for Hispanics—for whom statistics were not even available until 1970—rose from one-third in 1970 to nearly half in 1986.

The bottom-line result of this increased access to education is that, since test makers started

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American Workers and the 21st Century

This increased achievement has meant a rise in the number of minority college enrollees; 18 percent in the fall of 1986, as compared with 15 percent a decade ago, and 9 percent in 1970, although the 1970 figure must be adjusted because of the way Hispanics were counted. Overall college enrollment has grown dramatically, even though the traditional college-age population has been falling steadily since the late 1970s. Enrollments in postsecondary institutions rose

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keeping records by race, the greatest gains in achievement have been among black and Hispanic children. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that since 1977-78 the most significant improvements in reading, writing and mathematics scores across all grade levels tested have been among black children.

The College Board data show that not only have the numbers and proportions of blacks and Hispanics taking the SAT risen dramatically since 1976 (when it began reporting SAT data by race), the scores of these minority groups have shown the most rapid rates of increase. Since 1982, when SAT scores started rising again, following a steady decline begun in 1975, the combined math and verbal scores for whites rose 9 points, whereas the combined score for blacks rose 21 points, though still lagging behind the score for whites.

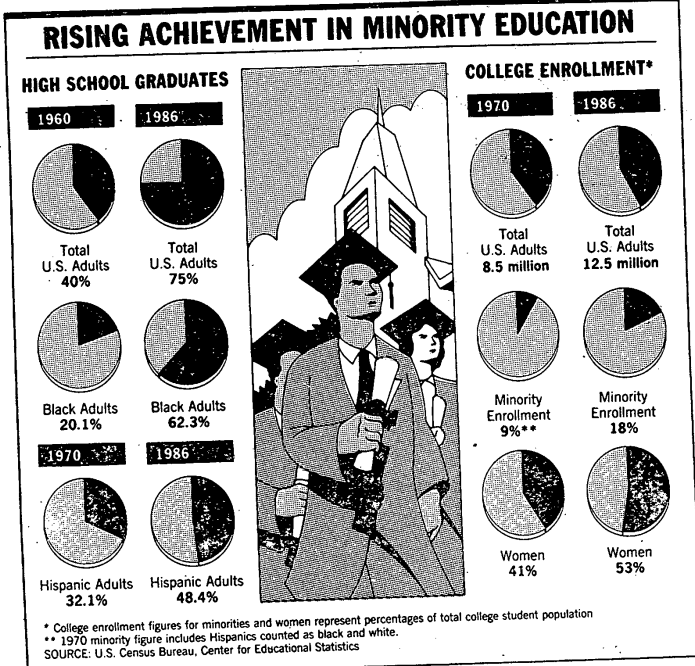
The number of high school students who take advanced placement courses is rising sharply. According to College Board President Donald M. Stewart, "Advanced Placement is challenging students in all kinds of schools, with its greatest growth among schools serving black, Hispanic and other minority students. While the total number of students participating increased 47 percent from 1984 to 1987, Hispanic participants increased 99 percent, blacks increased 83 percent, and Oriental/Asian American participants increased 85 percent."

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from about 8.5 million in 1970 to 12.5 million in 1986, a 46 percent increase. Eighty percent of this increase was due to women, three-fourths of them 25 years or older. Women now make up more than half (53 percent) of college enrollment, compared with 41 percent in 1970.

The results of higher educational attainment for minorities and women are already paying off for them in the workforce.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported



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for, the first quarter of 1988, "Across all broad categories, job growth in the 1980s has been more rapid for minority workers—blacks and persons of Hispanic origin—than for whites. Much of the employment increase since 1983, especially among minority workers, has been concentrated in managerial and professional speciality occupations. . . . Employment growth among women, especially minority women, continued to outpace that of men in the 1983-87 period. Women experienced particularly marked increases in managerial and professional jobs."

Labor force participation rates rose in the last decade for whites and Hispanics across all educational levels. For blacks, they rose for those who had four years of high school and for those who had one to three years of college. For reasons that are still unclear, they dropped for blacks with fewer than four years of high school and for those with four years of college or more.

It is also true that that the proportion of black and Hispanic high school graduates who enroll in a four-year college and finish with a bachelor's degree a few years later is about half that of whites. Approximately half of white high school seniors who were enrolled full-time in a four-year institution in October 1980 had earned a bachelor's or higher degree by spring 1986. This compares with 26 percent of blacks and Hispanics. Data show that growing numbers of bright high school graduates, especially blacks and Hispanics, are entering the armed services, business and industry, and non-collegiate post-secondary schools, where the prospects for finding a job are greater.

But as Solomon Arbeiter, College Board associate director of research, notes, this is not necessarily a bad thing. "To select alter-

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native post-secondary learning and work options does not foreclose a return to college at a late date. Nor does it indicate a failure on the part of the colleges or the black community, but rather a modest affirmation of the growing diversity of options for learning beyond high school."

It should be clear, from the above, that much of this concern about the future of America's work force may not be warranted. The nation will become more dependent on women and minority workers; at the same time, women and minority workers will become better trained and better educated. And, while many worry that there may be too

noted that this may not reflect "an overall lack of workers, but the declining numbers in the younger age groups in the labor force." In fact, the BLS reported, "the workforce of the future will be older."

This group of older workers may prove invaluable. Just as the youth population need not be the exclusive source for all new jobs, it need not be the exclusive source for those new jobs that require the highest levels of education. The nation has been turning out college degree-holders in record numbers—1.3 million per year since 1973. One in five adults 25 years old and older now (nearly 30

has at least one college degree. The BLS estimates that about one-fourth of the 27 million college graduates in the workforce are in jobs that do not require a college degree. The BLS also, in its latest projections concerning America's workforce by the year 2000, stated: "Despite the faster than average growth in employment for occupations requiring a bachelor's or higher degree, the surplus of college graduates that began in the early 1970s is expected to continue through the end of the century." Thus it may be that, as American employers seek better-trained and -educated workers, they turn to this pool of college graduates. ■

Hope for the Bottom Fifth

ANOTHER GROUP on whom attention has been focused in recent months is one whose members have been labeled "children at risk"—the "bottom fifth" of society's children. Members of this group are loosely defined as those children least likely to succeed in life—society's potential drop-outs. They live in poverty, are generally black or Hispanic and live in families headed by their mothers. The percentage of the population under 18 years living below the poverty level is often cited when trying to ascertain the number of children at risk. In 1986, then, 19.8 percent of children under 18 (12.2 million) lived below the poverty line—down from 21.8 percent (13.4 million) in 1983. What is often ignored, however, is that when the Census Bureau

first started keeping these statistics in 1959, the nation had the greatest number and highest proportion of children in poverty to date—17.2 million or 26.9 percent of all children under 18.

Data show that, while still lagging behind their white suburban counterparts, these children at risk are enrolling in school earlier, staying in school longer and achieving more than the children who lived in poverty just a decade ago. When given the opportunity and challenged to achieve at high levels by teachers who believe they can learn as well as anybody else, studies show they do. For example, studies by sociologist James Coleman comparing students at low-income Catholic schools and at low-income public schools have shown that students at

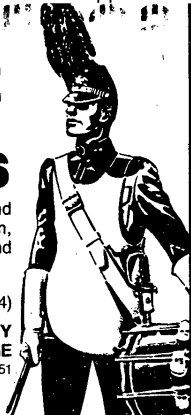
the Catholic schools outperformed their public school counterparts at all levels. What Colman and his researchers say is a contributing factor is that students in the Catholic schools all take an academic curriculum, and their teachers believe they can perform at that level. An analysis of student achievement in reading and math by the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 90 percent of recent gains across all age groups can be attributed to gains among students classified as disadvantaged in urban and rural schools. Archie LaPointe, NAEP director, said the results are due to society's demands for a "back to the basics" movement in education. ■

—C. Emily Feistritz

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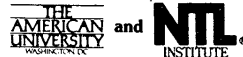


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Colleges Crack Down

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abuse and hazing. Nonetheless, Brant noted there were more reports of hazing incidents last year than in the previous three years. He said the figures were disappointing, but could offer no explanation.

Although contemporary fraternities conjure up images of gross behavior and nonstop partying as parodied in the film *Animal House*, Brant said the main ideals behind the Greek system have always been intellectual and social development, friendship and mutual assistance.

These lofty goals notwithstanding, Franklin & Marshall spokeswoman Patricia Lawson said modern fraternities are no more than "underage drinking clubs." And academically, she said fraternity members at Franklin & Marshall had a grade-point average of 2.66, compared with 2.82 for non-fraternity members.

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